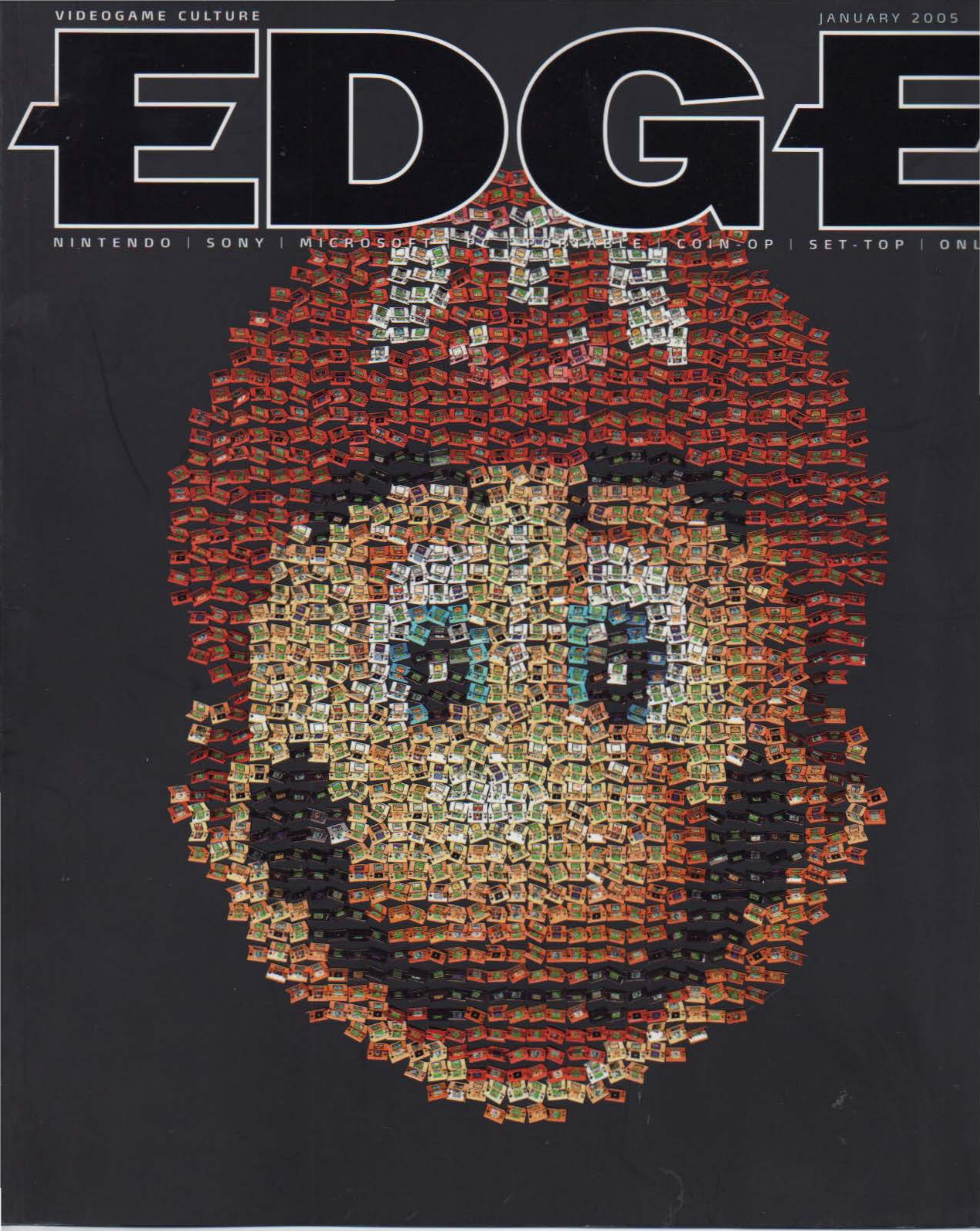
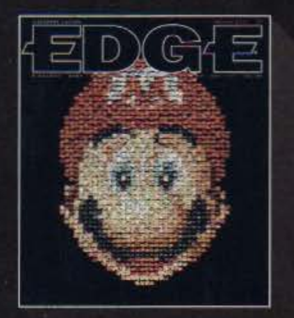

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
JANUARY 2005
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Yes, it really has been eight years since Nintendo invented the modern videogame in the form of *Super Mario 64*. And eight years is a long time in the young world of videogaming.

When the Nintendo 64's first Best Game Ever came along (it was the original **Edge** 10/10, in issue 35), the image of the PlayStation brand as the undisputed leader of the console-gaming world was something you would have only seen as a forecast in one of Ken Kutaragi's more excitable presentations to the Sony board. Contrast that with today, where you'd be hard pressed to find anyone willing to bet on the company releasing its grip on the mass market when PS3 arrives.

And yet, despite sometimes appearing keen to play up to its image as a sternly traditional and slow-moving corporation that has struggled to keep up with the pace of the world moving around it, Nintendo still cannot be touched as the grand master of handheld gaming – a position it has held not for eight years, but nearly 18. Since the original Game Boy's introduction the company has had the brands, the thirdparty support and the successive hardware to stave off challenges from a stream of wannabes. Although it hasn't, to date, had to face up to one like Sony...

In truth, Nintendo's DS and Sony's PSP should not be competitors. One is a dedicated gaming device whose games involve poking fingers up nostrils (see p87) and wirelessly linking up with friends to cooperatively jam out plinky-plonk tunes from old platformers (see p95), while the other has the slightly grander ambitions of delivering Hollywood movies into your palm, along with music and, well, if you feel like it, say, Namco's newest iteration of *Ridge Racer* (see p39). Yet these consoles' manufacturers appear to have decided that competitors they shall be – certainly in their home territory, Japan – and in this battle the biggest gun fired so far belongs to Nintendo, in the form of cover star *Super Mario 64 DS*, reviewed on p78.

Sony's response is imminent, and already there are those who've been so repelled by the DS unit's robustness that the PSP format's slinkier lines and shinier surfaces cannot arrive soon enough. For now, though, we're happy to lose ourselves in the often curious, and rarely less then entertaining, world of a special little machine.



EDGE

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"Silence, Earthling! My name is Darth Vader. I am an extraterrestrial from the planet Vulcan!"



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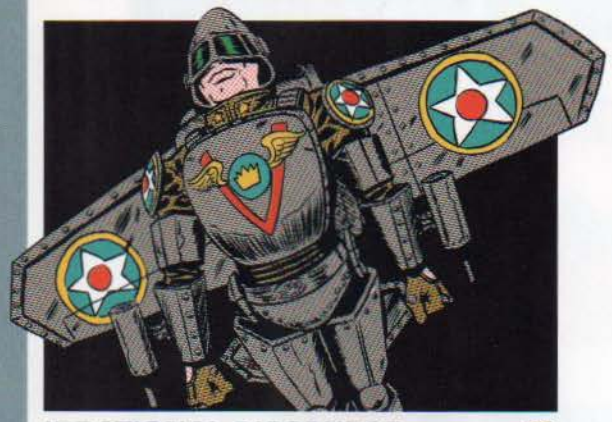
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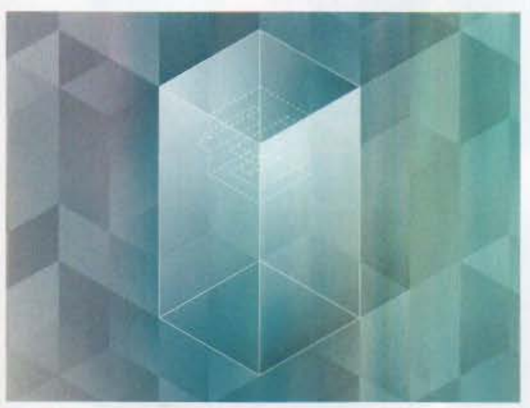
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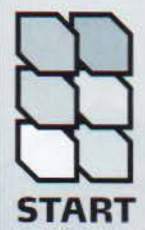


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START
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HARDWARE

Nintendo DS storms Japan and States

Combined first-week sales for both territories take handheld past the million mark as new portable gaming era arrives

It's been a while since **Edge** has featured photography of Japanese gamers queuing around the block to get their hands on new gaming hardware – but then it's been a while since Japanese gamers have been faced with something as thoroughly likeable as Nintendo's DS, which went on sale in the region on December 2. So it was that some of Tokyo's most popular gaming stores, such as Yodobashi Gamekan in west Shinjuku, attracted punters willing to sleep out in the winter cold from 11pm the previous evening in order to be among the first to get their hands on new consoles come opening time at 7am. By December 5, a massive 468,883 DS units had been purchased by Japanese consumers, making the format a resounding success for Nintendo, if an unexpected one (indeed, the surprise scale of demand saw the company's value immediately rise on the Tokyo stock exchange).

Among the first wave of DS buyers was an encouragingly high number of female gamers, along with many parents and grandparents looking to pick up machines as New Year gifts for children. Less happy were the scenes involving Chinese entrepreneurs seeking to buy units in bulk before returning to Hong Kong, which saw several run-ins with store management take place. It had happened before, and will happen again. (It also meant that the import scene outside of Japan wasn't as busy as it might otherwise have been.)

Unsurprisingly, *Super Mario 64 DS* (see p78) was, along with *Sawaru Made In Wario* (p87), the most popular game at launch, followed by the likes of *Pokémon Dash*, *Daigasso! Band Brothers* (p95), *Kiminotamenara Shineru* (p94) and *Chokkan Hitofude* (p95).

With DS units shipping with a supply of battery power on board, the streets were soon full of eager users trying out Pictochat. The simplistic comms facility was an instant hit, just as it has been with anyone who's had the opportunity to sample it in a social setting.

Key titles, such as *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Sawaru Made In Wario*, sold around 150,000 copies each within four days of going on sale in Japan – some achievement for the nation's depressed gaming climate – though Namco's *Mr Driller* shifted only 11,000



In America, the Nintendo DS launch success had already kicked off, when the format debuted on November 21. By the end of the launch week, over 500,000 machines had been purchased, leaving Nintendo projecting North American sales of one million before the year's end, a figure the company took delight in noting it took Apple 19 months to achieve with its iPod. (Scarily, over 800,000 GBA and GBA SP units also sold during the same Thanksgiving period in the US, setting a new one-week sales record for handhelds).

Nintendo is projecting American DS sales of one million before the year's end, a figure it took Apple's iPod 19 months to achieve

Across the globe, Nintendo expects to sell between four and five million DS units by the end of its fiscal year – a number that rather eclipses Sony's projection of shipping only 500,000 PSPs before the end of the same period.

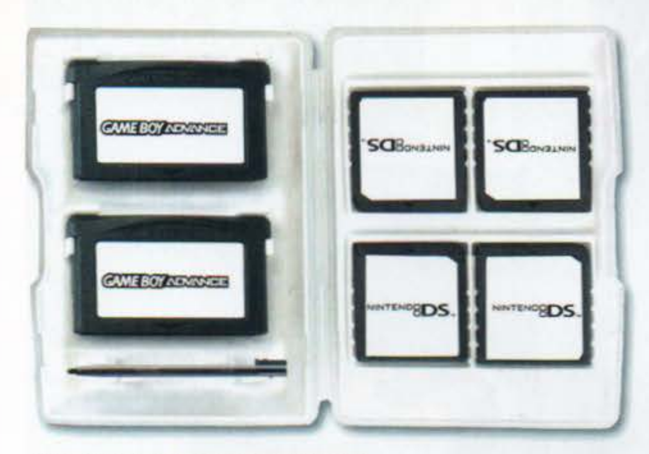
The new handheld era has begun – and in a manner that has shaken up the international gaming scene. Next stop Europe, in March.





The streets of Shinjuku had a buzz that hasn't been around for a long while as key stores prepared to move Nintendo's new hardware. Many had arrived to buy before heading off to work

Continued



Japanese DS accessories already available include several varieties of protective cases and screen wipes for buffing up your display. It's doubtful that many of these items will make it to UK stores









The Nintendo DS console is everything you'd expect Nintendo hardware to be: tough, easy to use and innovative. What it isn't is aesthetically appealing to everyone. Some complain about its size (and it is a fairly bulky device, housing as it does enough grunt to power two displays, with a super-durable battery, two cartridge ports, twin speakers, a microphone, a stylus holder and more besides), others point to its design simply not seeming 'Nintendo enough' (as if the original NES, American SNES, N64 and Virtual Boy really looked like members of the same family), while most agree that it feels a bit cheap and plasticky (it is made mostly of plastic, of course – and $150 (£77) won't break most gamers' banks). It doesn't help Nintendo, of course, that Sony's has something undeniably sexier-looking to offer.

It is a fairly bulky device, housing as it does enough grunt to power two displays, with a super-durable battery, two cartridge ports, twin speakers, a microphone and more besides

But in terms of functionality, there is no doubt that the DS is a supremely well-designed piece of equipment. The touchscreen sensitivity proves fine enough in each of the launch titles, and comes into its own with Pictochat, allowing for sketches and doodles to be created quickly and easily. And Nintendo appears to have delivered on its promise to upgrade screen resilience over that which was demonstrated at E3 this year: even after many hours of busy *Wario Ware* play the only marks in evidence on **Edge**'s units' screens are fingerprints, not scratches (although it is interesting to note that an official dual-screen protector is already available in Japan).

A full battery charge can last a good eight hours and recharging is quick, while the unit's sleep option, which automatically kicks in when you fold its screens together, is a genius touch, and evidence that Nintendo has really considered the implications of using handheld consoles on the move (close your DS before alighting from the train, jump on to your connecting service, open it up again and you're exactly where you left off).

Newswire

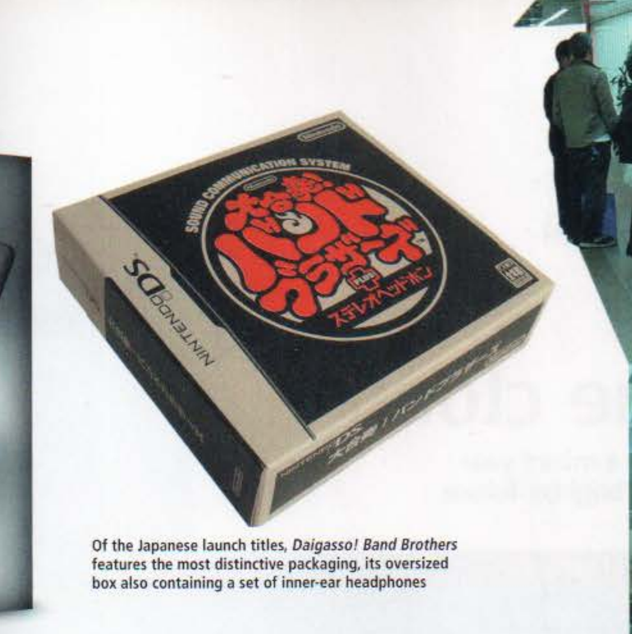


New retailer prepares to set up shop

Next year, the likes of Game will be joined on the high street by a new chain of stores that promise to 'represent [the] industry in a new and very positive way.' The ambitious chain, entitled Control, is the brainchild of retail expert and business author Richard Hammond (above), who says: "I'm a gamer but a hardcore retailer too – our plans are based on changing the relationship between gamers and game sellers, tipping the balance back in the favour of gamers, but doing so in a commercially viable way." Having seen some early drafts of his plans, we can confirm that Control has the genuine potential to seriously shake up the sometimes stagnant world of UK gaming retail. We'll have more news soon.



The DS's two screens match each other for brightness, although some early adopters have complained about dead pixels – a common problem with LCD displays. Meanwhile, Nintendo's new game packaging is tremendously robust



Of the Japanese launch titles, *Daigasso! Band Brothers* features the most distinctive packaging, its oversized box also containing a set of inner-ear headphones

With the exposed GBA port at its base and the effort involved in playing games that adopt complex control setups, the DS is not the most comfortable console to hold, and the fat of finger may find that its four small buttons and D-pad take some getting used to. The truth, of course, is that no design will feel comfortable to every single user when you have a userbase numbering millions.

Other issues are not so forgivable, however. For example, once you've inserted a DS cartridge into the console it's not actually possible to see what it is (forcing you to either power-up or click the game out of its slot and have a look). And having to reset the console to leave Pictochat is mildly irritating.

These are minor issues, of course, and countered by other aspects that work well, such as wireless connectivity (tests around **Edge**'s vast new offices revealed a remarkable amount of stability, although reports of conflict with wi-fi spots remain to be investigated) and multi-booting, which, though a little fiddly, is most definitely worth the while.

Clearly, then, Nintendo's DS is worth every one of those million-plus sales that have already been made, and it'll only become more attractive as developers further explore its potential. Now it's Sony's turn to take the stage.



The Japanese and American DS game packs provide handy receptacles for Game Boy Advance cartridges, although Europe may yet get cheaper cardboard alternatives



The presence of PSPs in public wasn't enough to cause a riot, but commuters were suitably interested in Sony's handheld



Look, but don't Touch

Prior to PSP's launch, Sony puts its console on public display – but only under watchful eyes

Nintendo's Touch! DS tour was all hands-on, but Sony's November promotional campaign was strictly eyes only: 23 train stations across Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya were graced by PSP installations. These panels of SCEI's minimalist white-and-pastel branding were inset with eye-level PSP units (preserved in heavy plastic coating, rather than exposed to the hostile rush-hour atmosphere) playing looping footage of upcoming titles. If the protective casing wasn't enough of a deterrent to commuters attempting to actually feel the unit in their hands, uniformed guards were also standing by with their backs dutifully turned to the delights on display behind them.

The subway campaign culminated in the mounting of a massive PSP replica in Tokyo JR station, broadcasting launch title footage, the launch date and celebrating the PlayStation's tenth anniversary (the date many had originally predicted Sony would choose for the PSP's launch). After the subways returned to relative normality, 'Tokyo Surprise', a similarly clinical advertising strike, was carried out in the fashion stores and upmarket cafes of the city, involving custom-created mannequins cradling PSPs with adoringly awed expressions on their lifeless faces – an image Sony's detractors might consider an unintentional irony. There was never any doubt that the PSP would prove eye-catching: the question as launch fever peaks and later subsides is whether, as with the PS2, Sony may have styled its handheld out of some of its prospective market.

The silver and the cloud

As 2004 draws to a close, it's time to reflect on a mixed year for UK game development and look forward to a brighter future

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It's an apt description of another year of extreme success and failure for the UK game-development community. On the debit side, the closure of UK studios, which peaked in 2003 with 23 biting the dust, has continued with another 17 or so following suit. And, significantly, some of the most recent casualties have been those developers that traded on their large size as one reason for inevitable survival. Most notable was the once 250-strong Argonaut group, which after a long period of financial pressure announced predicted losses of £6 million for the current financial year to its shareholders in October. The UK's other publicly owned super developer, Warthog, was only saved from a similar fate thanks to an acquisition by Tiger Telematics, the US company behind the as-yet-unproven Gizmondo (see p14).

The closure of UK studios, which peaked in 2003 with 23 biting the dust, has continued with another 17 or so following suit

More development jobs were lost with the final collapse of Acclaim. Its UK studios at Cheltenham and Manchester had a combined workforce of 160 prior to the US publisher filing for chapter seven liquidation in September. A planned rescue package for the studios, headed by ex-CEO Rod Cousens, failed to bear fruit. Other companies have taken the relative quiet of the Christmas period to trim their development resources. Following what it called a 'review of its football game portfolio', Codemasters suspended production of its *Club Football* series, resulting in the loss of 18 of its 400-odd staff, albeit with the majority of the development team being redeployed. And even that usual oasis of positivity, Climax, has been fighting rumours of redundancies. At the same time as announcing the creation of the UK's largest single studio, branded Climax Action and incorporating its London, Solent and Handheld divisions, it confirmed it was owed a significant amount of money by a publishing partner. The implication clearly was that this could have cause future problems if unresolved.

And yet 2004 has witnessed plenty of good news, too. Masked by the secrecy of its parent, the world's best-selling games series *Grand Theft Auto* remains a UK-developed product at the Edinburgh-based Rockstar North. And despite being one of the most expensive games ever developed in the UK, Lionhead and Big Blue Box's oft-delayed Xbox RPG *Fable* fulfilled many of its ambitions. More importantly, released pre-*Halo 2*, it was the console's fastest-selling game in the US, with 375,000 units shifted in its first week of release and over one million copies sold to date. The Lionhead group's head Peter Molyneux also took this opportunity to secure the studios' medium-term future by selling a minority stake to private equity firms for a reported £7 million. But even at this rarified level of development, the difficulties of successfully combining creativity and commercial acumen are starkly apparent. While *Fable* became a great success, the equally ambitious and oft-delayed *BC*, from fellow Lionhead satellite Intrepid, was placed on hold and its staff reassigned.

And such movement of staff is becoming the norm. In an increasingly volatile industry, as some studios close or restructure, much of the available







GTA: San Andreas and *Fable* are examples of UK success stories for 2004, while Intrepid's *BC* was 'suspended' – but studio boss Peter Molyneux expressed hopes it could be revived

Five tales of hardship

Those who've stumbled in the pursuit of entertainment

Company: Argonaut
Peak workforce: 250 (2003)
Offices: London, Just Add Monsters (Cambridge), LT Studios (Oxford), Argonaut Sheffield (Sheffield), Morpheme (London)
What went wrong? Delays to key original IP-based titles, cancellation of others combined with over-expansion took its toll
What's left? Jez San has bought back Just Add Monsters and Morpheme

Company: Warthog
Peak workforce: 230 (2003)
Offices: Manchester, Fever Pitch (Texas, US), Warthog Sweden (Sweden), ZedTwo (Manchester)
What went wrong? Cancellation of some titles combined with failure to get replacements signed quickly
What's left? Tiger Telematics picked up the lot for $1 million plus 498,000 shares

Company: Acclaim
Peak workforce: 160 (2003)
Offices: Manchester, Cheltenham
What went wrong? Systematic weakness of parent publisher over a number of years
What's left? Nothing

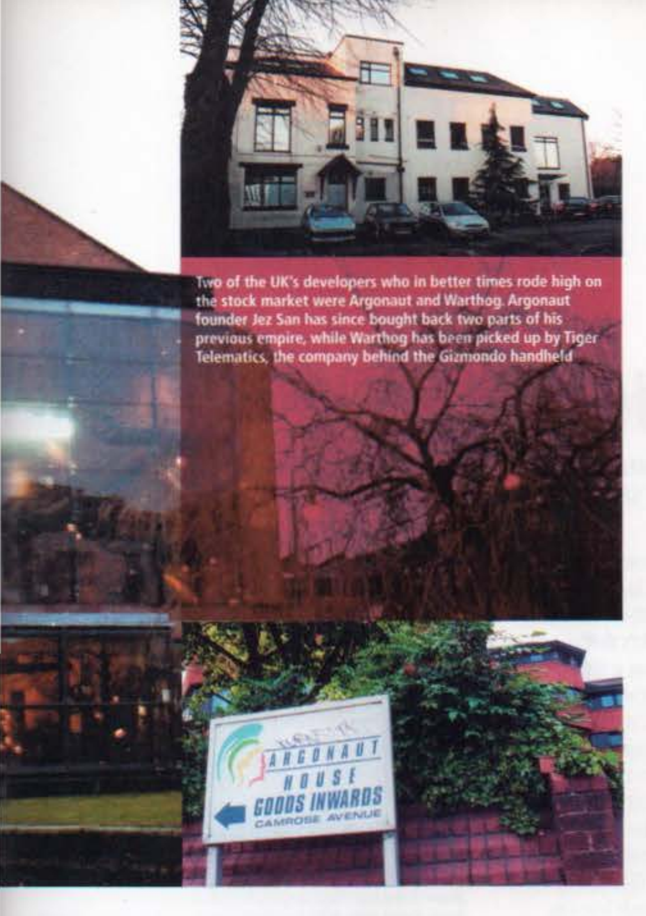
Company: Intrepid
Peak workforce: 40 (2003)
Offices: London
What went wrong? Oft-delayed game *BC* put on indefinite hold
What's left? Majority of staff have been absorbed into other Lionhead satellites

Company: Vis
Peak workforce: 150 (2003)
Offices: Dundee, Edinburgh, London, Isle Of Wight
What went wrong? It's still around (just) but since merging with sickly US publisher BAM, big hope *State Of Emergency 2* remains unfinished
What's left? London and Isle Of Wight have been shut, and overall headcount down to a third of peak. Can *SOE2* save the day?



The grade one listed building that was home to Acclaim Manchester has seen its fair share of boom and bust, having also been HQ for seminal UK publisher Ocean and then developer Software Creations, creator of games like *Equinox*





Two of the UK's developers who in better times rode high on the stock market were Argonaut and Warthog. Argonaut founder Jez San has since bought back two parts of his previous empire, while Warthog has been picked up by Tiger Telematics, the company behind the Gizmondo handheld

talent is being sucked up by expansion elsewhere. For example, the industry's big hitters, such as EA, Sony and the Microsoft-owned Rare, are all on recruitment drives to boost existing studio numbers. Indeed, one of the most positive signs concerning the health of UK development is that overall jobs numbers are up. A forthcoming survey of the UK development industry by analyst Nick Gibson estimates that while the number of studios has dropped from around 200 to 150 since 2000, the total number employed has increased from 6,000 to 7,000.

And it's this level of consolidation by the strongest players which is now shaping the employment playing field. Even without the continuing trials of getting projects signed and completed on time, independent developers are feeling the pressure from the improved pay and conditions offered by their larger competitors.

"I expect to lose a number of key staff to the new studio [publisher X] has opened down the road," one senior development figure told us last year. Not only did his prediction come true, but 12 months on he's joined them.


Rare's *Kameo: Elements Of Power* follows an elf in her struggle against a troll king. The game is due in 2005, along with *Conker: Live & Reloaded* – previewed on page 41

Five on the up

Dev facilities continuing to push onward in 2004

Company: Lionhead
Peak workforce: 280 (2004)
Offices: Lionhead, Black & White Studios, Big Blue Box (all Guildford)
What went right? Having Peter Molyneux as creative director and owner hasn't hindered, and multi-million sellers *Black & White* and *Fable* could see sequels for years to come
What's next? *Black & White 2* and *The Movies* due in 2005

Company: EA
Peak workforce: 310 (2004)
Offices: EA Chertsey, EA Warrington, Criterion (Guildford)
What went right? The world's biggest publisher has the cash and production processes to buy and outbid the rest
What's next? Expect more Potter, while Warrington is working on a driving game and *Modern Combat*, and Criterion will release FPS *Black*

Company: Sony
Peak workforce: 530 (2004)
Offices: Sony London, Sony Cambridge, Sony Liverpool, Evolution (Cheshire), Guerrilla (Holland)
What went right? As a format holder, Sony is keen to push the envelope of its console in technical and cultural terms, and that requires enormous developer talent
What's next? Expect an impressive collection of European launch PSP titles

Company: Kuju
Peak workforce: 160 (2004)
Offices: Godalming, Brighton, London, Sheffield
What went right? After a tortuous 2003, canny business dealings combined with staff restructuring resulted in deals with Konami, Nintendo and Activision
What's next? The GameCube version of *Advance Wars* is key while Konami's SAS game *The Regiment* and various PSP projects are looking promising

Company: Rare
Peak workforce: 180 (2004)
Offices: Twycross
What went right? The company's 2002 purchase by Microsoft has yet to be repaid but there's plenty of drive to prove the doubters wrong
What's next? *Kameo* and the *Reloaded* version of *Conker* are due in 2005, while everyone awaits the reappearance of a certain Ms Dark

DEV TOOLS

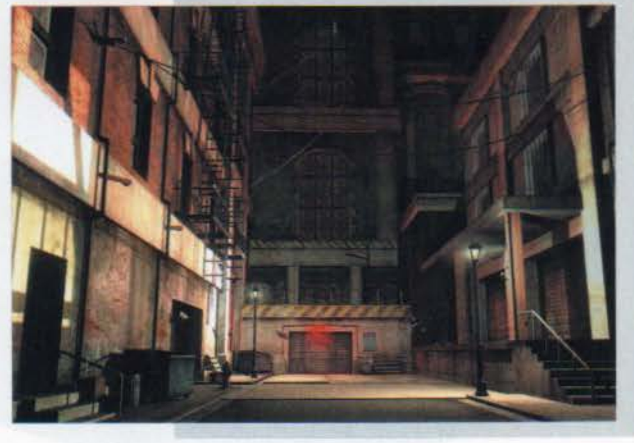
Climax marks out its territory

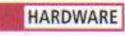
New Tomcat toolset takes the bite out of next-gen development

It wasn't long into the lifespan of the current generation that smart developers began looking ahead to how they were going to take best advantage of the next hardware leap. Climax has declared itself ahead of the curve by unveiling Tomcat, a shader toolset which greatly simplifies the programming load for creating complex effects. Also included in its capabilities is normal mapping, singled out as Climax as the key to delivering next-gen detail with this-gen resources. The results can be seen below, in images from in-house technology demos.

Climax has several Tomcat-engineered projects in the works; we'll be taking a look at them in detail next month.







Gizmondo limps to launch

UK-designed handheld sneaks out boasting a new graphics chip, but suffering stock shortages and no gaming software

Tiger Telematics' press statements have called it 'the softest of soft launches', but compared to the razzmatazz of the Sony and Nintendo roadshows, Gizmondo's debut bordered on the flaccid. After signing a last-minute deal with Nvidia to equip the device with a more powerful GoForce 3D graphics part, manufacture and testing of the console had to begin afresh. As a result, the company was unable to supply any units to retail at launch, instead distributing the small number of units it had ready to some of the 560,000 customers it claims have made internet pre-orders. Another casualty of the GoForce switch has been the machine's gaming launch line-up, with the first three titles, *SuperDrop Mania*, *StuntCar Extreme* and *Angel Fish*, delayed until after Christmas. Other titles are being reworked and optimised to take advantage of the machine's newly increased power.

It's an embarrassing start for the Gizmondo, whose aggressive television and internet advertising had been timed for the launch, but the machine's range of capabilities mean it is not nonsensical as a standalone purchase. Running Windows Media Player 9, and allowing music and video files to be copied direct to the device's SD-card storage via USB 2.0, it is a more immediately credible multimedia device than any other gaming hybrid yet announced. Current owners will also be able to distract themselves with the machine's GPS functions while they wait for the games to arrive. Out of the box, the device is capable of sending an update to any mobile phone number, allowing the recipient to see a map displaying the Gizmondo's (and the Gizmondo owner's) current location.



Angel Fish **plays like a very traditional 2D shooter, but the hand-drawn style of its backdrops gives it a distinctive character, and it boasts a highly satisfying quad-laser smartbomb attack**

After such a disastrous launch, there is a temptation to write off the Gizmondo, but as its developer reveals more of its future plans, there are more and more indications that to do so might be unwise. The intention now is to have stock ready for a full retail rollout, supported by optimised game software, by early February next year.

It's not yet clear how big an impact the GoForce chip will have on the kind of games Gizmondo can run; the 'Xbox in your pocket' is a compelling marketing line, but so far the company has nothing to show which backs up its claim. However,



From protoype (courtesy of ZX Spectrum designer Rick Dickinson) to finished article. It's been a bumpy ride for Gizmondo, which has changed name, graphics chip and button design along the way. Early astrological sign-style symbols were revised when journalists pointed out that no one would know what to call them

SOUND BYTES

"By entering our prize contest, you can help to establish the facts of what happened on November 22nd, 1963 – and win up to $100,000 in the process!"
JFK Reloaded – the game which recreates the assassination of President Kennedy – announces a competition for conspiracy theorists everywhere (read more on p21).

"Natural challenges with finalizing all the key features and localization issues across worldwide territories have led to the difficult choice of pushing back the release date in order to ensure that *Gran Turismo 4* lives up to the exacting standards of the 36 million-plus fans worldwide that have purchased previous versions."
An SCEA statement reveals the reason – or at least a reason – for *GT4*'s latest delay

"They look great! They are small enough to travel with and will help me pass away many hours when I'm on tour, especially on those long bus rides."
Pop 'star' Pink at the DS's US launch





While *SuperDrop Mania* won't benefit much from the new Nvidia graphics chip, *StuntCar Extreme* already looks much improved, with more details on buildings and ramped-up lighting effects

there's no question that the machine would have otherwise been badly underpowered going into 2005, so, despite the launch headaches, the new graphics chip has undoubtedly strengthened its position.

Also unconfirmed at this stage is just how heavyweight the future line-up might be. It's known that the company is in talks with major publishers, and if Gizmondo can gain access to big brand franchises, its gaming credibility will be greatly enhanced for the wider market. Brands alone aren't enough – as the N-Gage's early months

The 'Xbox in your pocket' is a compelling marketing line, but so far the company has nothing to show to back up the claim

showed – but Tiger Telematics is confident that it has the skills to tailor home console hits to maximise their appeal on a handheld. Its recent acquisition of Warthog has given it access to Tusk, a game-porting engine it believes will streamline the process of adapting games. The engine will already be being pressed into service following deals with SCi and Microsoft to launch games such as *Age Of Empires* and the *Conflict* series on the Gizmondo. The game pricing policy, which stretches from £10 for the simpler launch titles to £30 for prestige games, also indicates a greater sophistication in its understanding of the gaming market than some of its current rivals have shown.

Its multimedia ambitions are equally far-reaching. To support the device's use as a music player, Tiger Telematics will be launching a commercial music download website, using the OD2 service which backs Coca Cola, HMV and MSN's European music download portals. The company is also confident it will have full GPS software ready for the February 'hard' launch, making the unit's £230 pricetag seem suddenly much more competitive when compared to £400 in-car units. A car cradle and other accessories will be available to back this kind of usage. GPS also lets the Gizmondo act as a security device: set up a 'geo-fence' – a virtual perimeter – around the Gizmondo, leave it in the boot when you park, and if the Gizmondo (and therefore your car) leaves the perimeter, you'll receive an instant alert to your mobile phone. Later in the year full email support will follow.

Gizmondo could hardly have more to prove. Recent bullish announcements that Tiger Telematics expects the unit's price point to go as low as £50 within a year sound almost suicidal, but make more sense in context of the device's ability to subsidise itself through targeted advertising to which users can choose to sign up. However, despite trialling the Smart Adds system with 52 advertisers earlier this year, the company isn't able to confirm take-up of the new system. It's the perfect illustration of Gizmondo's current situation – an ambitious promise backed up by nothing more concrete than another ambitious promise. However, if Gizmondo's exuberant confidence is justified, and if Tiger Telematics' pockets are deep enough to sustain the company until these promises become reality, then the new handheld war might yet – almost unbelievably – become a three-way battle.













WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

As anyone who's read E143's interview with Dominik Diamond will know, swearing isn't big or clever, but it is – in context – jolly funny. Monkeon's collections of text adventure screenshots capture the reactions to profane user input, five pages of typed-in filth and indignant automatic responses. The best is probably *Very Big Adventure* which, upon receipt of a 'shit', places the user in a swearbox with a washstand and soap. 'You know what to do,' it says. Yes. Yes, we do.

Site:
Swearing in text adventures
URL:
http://www.monkeon.co.uk/swearadventure/



A rare sighting of a retail-ready Gizmondo. The jury is still out on how wise a choice the name is, but there's no doubt that the restrained packaging design gives the console some class

ALMOST FAMOUS

If there's one thing Nintendo excels at, it's making bright, colourful games that both children and adults can enjoy. But if there's another, slightly less important thing, then it's throwing 'celebrity' filled parties for the launch of new hardware. The launch of the DS was no exception, as celebrities as diverse as JC Chasez (erm, from *Nsync?), Ethan Embry (the slacker in Clueless), and Alexis Arquette (the *really* odd Arquette) gathered in Hollywood to celebrate 'touching and feeling'. "Yo, this is the dopest thing I've seen in my life," exclaimed a clearly overwhelmed Donald Faison (above right) who plays Dr Chris Turk in Scrubs. With commendations like that, who needs videogame mags?

• www.nintendo.com/systemsds

Newswire



Famitsu grows up

As *DQVIII* brought Japanese salarymen back to game stores, they also found a new experiment from Famitsu publisher Enterbrain waiting for them on the shelves: Otonafami, the Famitsu For Adults. Adopting a radically different design from Famitsu's excitable style, Otonafami's interiors are text-heavy, with numerous interviews and in-depth analyses of software, consoles and digital entertainment. The debut issue naturally discusses *DQVIII* at length, and compares the DS and PSP in a non-biased manner. Enterbrain is closely watching the reception of Otonafami to determine the magazine's prospects for a regular print run.

MOVIE

Children of the revolution

Advent Children's co-producer talks about making a sequel to a success and a follow-up to a flop

When you're already working on the 12th instalment on a decade-spanning series, why would you want to write a sequel to the seventh? And when you've bankrolled a notorious CGI flop, why would you even consider making another? In any other context the idea would be entirely preposterous, bordering on the comical. Only a game with the gravitational pull of *Final Fantasy VII* could explain Square Enix's decision to create a film which takes up two years after their feted RPG concluded.

Best known for his role as the producer of *Kingdom Hearts*, **Shinji Hashimoto** (Advent Children's co-producer) began his career as a CGI artist on modern anime's renowned point of origin, Akira. His work with the *Final Fantasy* series dates back to the fifth instalment, but his involvement in the sales and marketing of *FFVII* have left him with a clear understanding of how fervid its fans can be: "We left the ending to *FFVII* deliberately open to allow the players to draw their own conclusions. But it certainly took a fair bit of courage to go on record defining what happened two years later for this film."

A bit of courage may be something of an understatement as, in the 25-minute preview, we



witness the return of the full character roster from secondary walk-ons Reno, Rufus and Marlene through all the central characters up to, perhaps most confusingly for plot-watchers, a glimpse (and voice credit) of the instantly recognisable silver-haired antagonist himself: Sephiroth.

On one hand, Advent Children is everything that Square's first (and, as it was presumed by many at the time, last) feature should have been. "The thought process behind this film is quite different to that of The Spirits Within," explains Hashimoto. "With that we were creating a feature film for the









Advent Children has a warmer feel than Spirits Within, although it's not without its own gloom (above left). Indeed, Square Enix is attempting to address all manner of emotional themes

young or old, fan or newcomer but here we are focusing on something specifically for *FFVII* fans – a complete works DVD-released sequel. We have a positive attitude to this whole different strategy and feel it's a lot more targeted."

Indeed, its success is staked on the fact that the film builds upon an impressive, much-loved and well-recognised universe rather than creating a new abstract world which merely echoes the brand's themes. Similarly it features some of the most identifiable videogame characters from a unique IP and, in daring to explain some of *FFVII*'s climactic mysteries, it encourages the speculation and grass roots internet-based peer marketing that 2001's film never achieved.

On screen, the action is fast paced and technically impressive, even for a post-Matrix generation with CGI ennui. The lush orchestration will be deeply evocative for any one of the millions of gamers who sampled its original programmed form. Indeed, Square Enix has been careful to maintain team coherency. "The core personnel who worked on the original are all still in place so I am certainly not worried about maintaining the feel and mythology of the *Final Fantasy* universe," enthuses Hashimoto. "Certainly having Nobuo [Uematsu] on board musically helps to ground the viewing into the atmosphere that the game produced." The film also neatly dovetails into *Dirge Of Cerberus*, the forthcoming thirdperson shooter focused on hidden character Vincent Valentine, forcibly hauling the world of film and videogames a little closer, at least in marketing potential.

But on the other hand these are all the self same facets that will restrict it. It's a film which requires, even demands, an intimate knowledge of a niche, seven-year-old slice of almost obsolete media. Even the concise introductory synopsis will not adequately paper over the information cracks in a newcomer's mind and, even for those who completed the game, seven years is a long time to expect anything more than a cursory remembrance of characterisation.

Whereas the precursor was merely stamped with FF's branding, this film is fundamentally targeted at the microcosm of fandom





Nobuo Uematsu (top) has composed some of the most distinctive themes in *Final Fantasy*'s history. Shinji Hashimoto (above), Advent Children's co-producer, has a background in animation

The film's tone is no less ambitious. Kitase and Hashimoto are demanding a great deal from their viewers as they expound themes such as Cloud's guilt for his part in the death of Aerith. Likewise, the ecological (the world and humanity share the same 'life-stream') and sociological concerns (Cloud's overarching quest for absolution through saving orphans), while worthy and interesting to the keenest fans, are dangerously over complicated by the use of new, abstract terminology.

Advent Children seemingly has no mainstream aspirations and, despite the superficial artistic similarities between this film and The Spirits Within, there has, in reality, been an about-turn: a kind of ideological repentance. Whereas the precursor was deliberately etched onto a blank canvas and merely stamped with *FF*'s weighty branding, this film is fundamentally targeted at the microcosm of fandom. Artistically this will surely result in a worthier, more coherent synergy between Square Enix's game and film output but whether the financial gamble will pay off this time is far from assured.





However, for Hashimoto and, implicitly, the wider Square Enix plan for company evolution, success or failure of this particular product seems irrelevant when compared to the importance of the long-term drive for videogame and film's cross-pollination: "As creators you have to keep challenging yourselves. We love to create beautiful images, so for our company, we're going to keep pushing the into both film and videogame media." The implication being that this brainchild is perhaps just the advent to a new concept of convergence altogether.

INTERVIEW

The new World Of WarCraft order

Looking back at, and forward from, the WOW launch with Jeffrey Kaplan, lead world content and raid designer at Blizzard

How did you all spend launch day? Were the celebrations tempered at all by the fact that going gold is just the beginning for the game?

Most of us spent it in a very tired state. Fry's Electronics in Fountain Valley, southern California, held a midnight signing, and about 5,000 people showed up to get their copies of *WOW* autographed by the development team. We were there until almost 5am. Launch day was spent monitoring the servers, working on the upcoming patch, playing *World Of WarCraft* (of course), and trying to keep our eyes open.

Did anyone on the team manage to spend the Thanksgiving holiday without logging on at least once?

I can't speak for the rest of the team, but I know I spent a good part of my Thanksgiving in Azeroth.

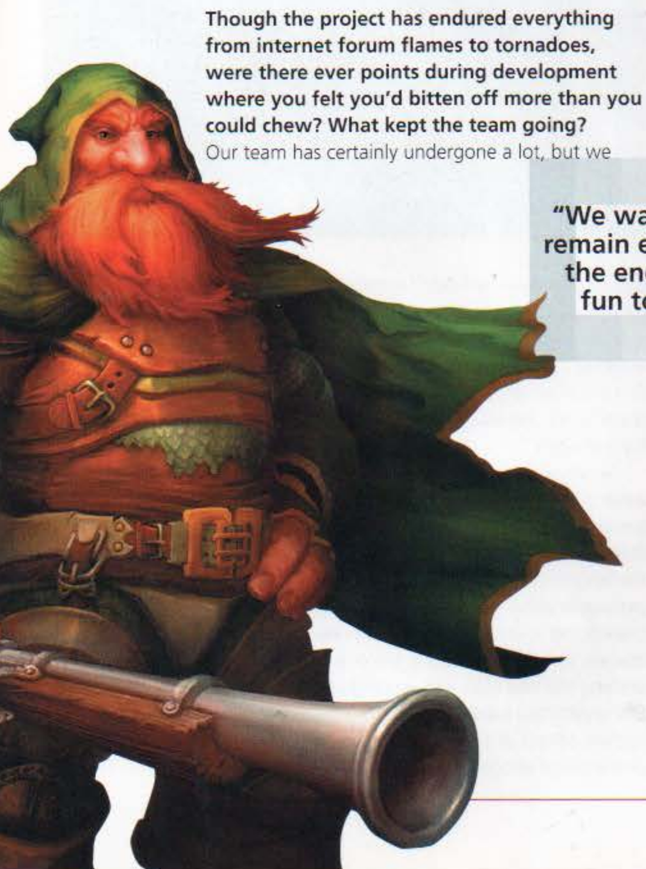
Though the project has endured everything from internet forum flames to tornadoes, were there ever points during development where you felt you'd bitten off more than you could chew? What kept the team going?

Our team has certainly undergone a lot, but we knew we had a great game on our hands – we've been playing it internally for years. We knew the potential, as well as the opportunity, before us. It was also important to deliver a product worthy of the Blizzard reputation, as there were scores of Blizzard fans and MMO fans counting on us to produce something special. When there are so many people interested in what you are doing, it makes you want to work harder. And working on this development team is a privilege. Knowing that you are working with the best programmers, designers and artists to create content for the game only makes each individual raise their contribution even more. People use the cliché 'trial by fire', but we've survived 'trial by tornado' – we're ready for anything now!

Has the ongoing, upgradeable nature of the MMO made it easier to draw a line under *WOW* development and release it? Or were you still fighting the urge to keep adding new content right until the end?

We're never satisfied. I would be worried if we were. We don't talk about *WOW* as a thing of the past around here: we spend our time planning for future content and features. Even before the game was shipped, we had features designed and tasked that we knew would be post-release updates. We want Azeroth to evolve and grow, and mostly to remain exciting and fun for our players. And at the end of the day, the game is just too much fun to work on not to keep adding content.

"We want Azeroth to evolve and grow, and to remain exciting and fun for our players. And at the end of the day, the game is just too much fun to work on to not keep adding content"



How have the entirely fresh players, who haven't had the acclimatisation of playing in the beta, been taking to the game?

They seem to be taking to it quite well, and it's exciting to see players who have never played an MMO before running around, experiencing the game for the first time. The game is very accessible to those who have no previous experience. An early design goal was to have the first play session be easy and rewarding, while at the same time teaching players the basic mechanics of an MMO. I think that's one area where we've succeeded.



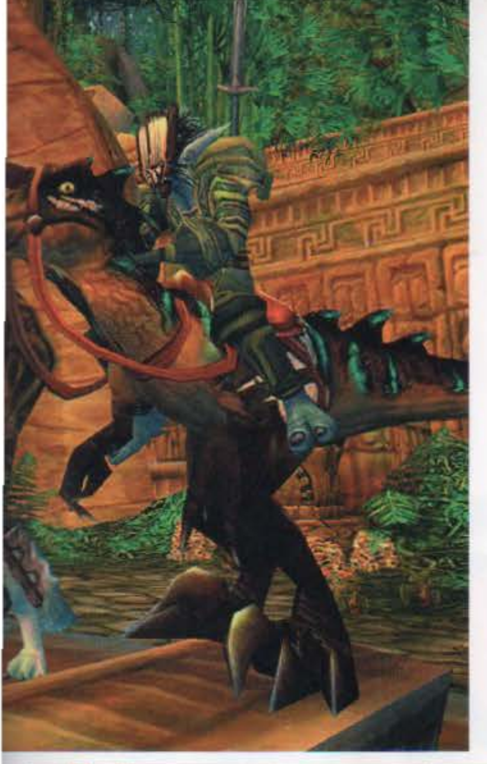
Two-hundred thousand accounts were created on *WOW*'s first day, with the 40 launch servers hastily doubled to meet demand. The Euro launch in early 2005 is unlikely to be any more subdued

How much of a development challenge has appealing to both MMO veterans and first-time players proven? Some feel *WOW* tends towards the latter – would you consider that a strength of the game, rather than a failing?

Personally, I felt it was more challenging to create a game that was appealing to first-time players rather than one that appealed to MMO veterans. I say this because I am an MMO veteran, so I know exactly what that crowd is looking for in a game. Oftentimes, on various message boards, I would read some thread saying that *WOW* was too easy – yet no one was able to beat any of our raid content [high-level mass group combat] during the beta. Just because we didn't make levelling up in the game a full-time job doesn't mean that the game lacks challenge. Spending time grinding is not challenging. Using your skill as a player to overcome a challenge is where the fun lies.

In our last issue Richard Bartle, co-creator of the first MUD, argued that current MMOs suffer from being shaped by the demands of







players, rather than the design team. How resilient do you feel *WOW* has been to the very vocal Blizzard fanbase?**

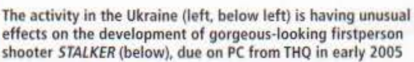
We have a very thick skin here at Blizzard. It's very important to listen to your fans, but at the same time there are things we know about the development process that our fans are not privy to. We've had to make hard calls like implementing a death penalty, item durability or the rest state. Rather than just caving in to your fans and pulling out the features they don't like, it's important to iterate on them until you reach your design goals. It's often an unpleasant process for beta testers, but it's very necessary.

It would be a mistake to always listen to the fanbase and cave in on every issue, just as it would be a mistake to never listen to the players. A good developer knows when to make the right call.

What's next for the *WOW* team – are you all in it for the long haul of building extra content, or will some of you move on to less-fraught standalone projects?

We never even stopped to catch our breath. There's a lot more content and features that we want to deliver, and we've been working on our first content patch for the game for some time now – in fact, before *WOW* even shipped.





The activity in the Ukraine (left, below left) is having unusual effects on the development of gorgeous-looking firstperson shooter *STALKER* (below), due on PC from THQ in early 2005





INTERVIEW

The politics of play

Ukraine's GSC Game World is working on STALKER while the chaos surrounding the disputed election unfolds around them. Oleg Yavorksy, senior PR manager, describes the effects on the game's development

How have the last couple of weeks been for you?

It's been quite a stressful time. Basically, days have looked as follows: morning – in the office; evening – in the streets. Some guys on the team have even gone in shifts during the day to join the protesters in the main square of Kiev.

Have the protests affected development of the game?

Although everybody on the team has been affected by the events, there's hardly been any damage to the development process. The first couple of days were psychologically tough – there was an air of suspense around; everybody feared a civil war or expected some kind of aggression to flare up. The team's reaction was original in a way – we unofficially promised to make one of the candidates into a hideous monster for the game!

Do you think living through recent turmoil like the Chernobyl disaster and the current election crisis affects the themes you chose for your games?

Obviously there's some kind of after effect. It certainly has an impact on the visual design of the games: we prefer greyish and darker tones here, while western Europeans like brighter colours more. I guess that's an impact of the USSR's history, the architecture style of massive concrete structures, the Chernobyl accident and other factors which have influenced the look of our titles.

Do you think the current situation might inspire games you make in the future?

It's definitely possible. Right now we are seeing Ukraine change its outlook. People have awoken to the need to fight for their right to express their opinion, and that's a remarkable process. All the demonstrations throughout Ukrainian cities have been characterised by people's unity and friendliness towards each other – something I've never seen before personally. So, they should probably get us to make the next *Freedom Fighters* game! The country is moving towards more transparent politics and democracy, and along with that people's mindsets are changing. Although it's a lengthy process, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel already. So maybe our games will get more orange-coloured in the future!

How do the current events make you feel about videogames? Have they started to feel trivial compared to the realities you're facing, or do they feel even more vital as a form of creative expression?

When the future of your country and your personal future is at stake, you can't think of anything else than this future. Elections and vote rigging have definitely turned into topic number one for all of us here. Nevertheless, with four projects on our hands, we are in no position to relax. Although we can't wait for the elections to be over and things to have changed for the better, work in the development pit doesn't stop.

Steam ups the pressure

First blood goes to Valve, but its legal tussle with Vivendi is symbolic of a division between successful developers and their publishers





The launch of *Half-Life 2* (top) and *Counter-Strike Source* (above) via Steam, though dogged with problems, has further convinced Valve that its own distribution model has a guaranteed future

It's only one battle in what may be a long war, but Valve Software has won the first round of its tortuous legal action with publisher Sierra/Vivendi Universal Games and its French parent Vivendi Universal. On November 22, US District Judge Thomas S Zilly ruled the publisher had not been authorised to distribute Valve's games to cybercafés for pay-for-play activities. As a result, Valve may recover general damages, although not consequential or punitive damages, from the copyright infringement it suffered.

"We're happy the court has affirmed the meaning of our publishing contract. This is good news for Valve and its cybercafé partners around the world," said **Gabe Newell**, founder and CEO of Valve. "We continue to add value to our program and we look forward to working with cafés to get them signed up and offering Valve's latest games to their customers."

The outstanding matter of whether Valve attempted to conceal the implications of its electronic distribution system Steam from the companies' 2001 publishing agreement will be decided at another court hearing due on March 21.

For, while the roles of developer and publisher have been in flux for a number of years, the relationship between Valve and Vivendi has brought the issue into sharp focus. On the surface, they should be the best of friends. Thanks to the success of the eight-million-selling *Half-Life*, both companies have generated huge profits. Yet, for Valve at least, there's long been concern that it's not reaping full reward from its efforts.

Financially independent from publisher pressure, Valve is one of the few developers able to retain control of its intellectual property. And with its founders having experience of the wider software business, notably from time at Microsoft, the company's always been more aware than most when it comes to wider business opportunities – such as giving away tools allowing the online community to modify its games.

Indeed, one of the main drivers behind Steam in the first place was the success of the *Counter-Strike* series, the online terrorist-vs-counter-terrorist shooter. Generating over three billion player minutes per month, it remains the world's most popular online game. But because it was developed as a *Half-Life* mod, by a group of bedroom

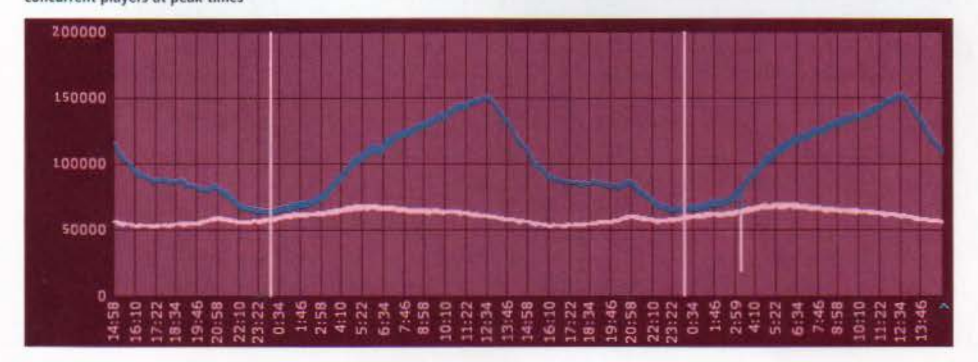
One of the main drivers behind Steam was the success of Counter-Strike. Generating over three billion player minutes per month, it remains the world's most popular online game

developers, one reason for *Counter-Strike*'s success has always been its free availability.

Without the opportunity to generate significant cash either from retail box sales or monthly subscription fees, Newell long complained that the success of *Counter-Strike* was actually costing Valve money in respect of support and servers. This triggered the development of Steam. A streaming broadband game distribution system, it's been the key mechanism in getting cybercafés, especially in piracy-rife Asian countries, to pay for access to Valve's games. Significantly, this was the reason Valve originally sued Vivendi over the issue of who owned the rights to distribute games to cybercafés. With US licences starting at $100 (£52) per month for ten PCs, Valve's victory in this matter is likely to prove lucrative.

Yet where Steam became more contentious was its ability to let Valve sell games direct. By cutting out the middlemen, such as Vivendi and retailers, Valve's able to claim a much larger chunk of a game's price. Announcing Steam at the Game Developers Conference in 2002, for example, Newell claimed Valve would generate a margin of around $30 (£15) per sale, compared to the $10 (£5) or less it received from its retail publishing deal with Vivendi. It's this that lies at the heart

Even before the release of the *HL2 Deathmatch* add-on, Steam has been regularly handling 150,000 concurrent players at peak times






Thanks to the huge global fanbase for its games, Valve is one of the first developers to attempt to circumvent the commercial power of publishers and retailers and go direct

of the dispute, with Vivendi counter-suing Valve, saying it provided assurances that Steam would not be used to cannibalise retail sales.

In one of its court filings, for example, Vivendi claims Newell 'repeatedly and falsely assured Sierra and VUG that retail sales would remain "the key to [their] strategy"'. It also says Newell told VUG's CEO in September 2000 'that "online is a way to nurture the retail business" and that he could not understand how one could make money by solely focusing on the online aspect'.

When asked a similar question last year, prior to the launch of *Counter-Strike Condition Zero*, Newell told us: "We'll see some cannibalisation and we'll also see some new sales. I think it will broaden distribution for our products. For example there are bunches of countries where we will be able to sell our products where there's either no retail distribution or where there's a lag between the US launch and localised availability."

However, on the deeper question of the developer/publisher relationship, he was more resolute: "We see a lot of developers are better connected to their customers than their publisher. I remember sitting with a PR person and saying: 'How long until this press release goes out?' He replied: 'It's got to go through this and that and then through legal. We'll probably have it out in six weeks'. I went back to my office and sent out an email to a bunch of websites and it reached 100,000 people in eight hours."

Whatever the final outcome of all this, what's certain is that the top tier of developers will continue to use such access to grow their own, not their publisher's, business.


Valve Software's Gabe Newell: looking to increasingly cut out the middle man

CONTROVERSY

The $100,000 kill

Traffic Games' Kennedy assassination 'interactive simulator' is the latest title to attract media outrage – and conspiracy nuts



It was an easy target for a media looking to stir up panic about violence in games. 'Sick computer game pays children to shoot president' is a dream headline for a number of hysterical publications, but the reality is rather more serious-minded. *JFK Reloaded* uses FPS technology to put players in the position of Lee Harvey Oswald, and scores their shots according to how closely they replicate the findings of the Warren Commission. "We believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone," explains **Kirk Ewing** (above), Traffic's managing director, "but 70 per cent of people in the United States still believe there was a conspiracy. *JFK Reloaded* takes people back in time so they can actually see for themselves."

It's an interesting idea, employing paying players to generate the data to support Traffic's beliefs about the endlessly disputed events of November 22, 1963. Ewing vigorously denies that Traffic is cashing in on some cheap, tasteless publicity. "I'm not going to deny that we're a commercial organisation," he explains, "but the assassination was something that everyone has discussed, and we all have differing opinions on it. But it's a ballistics conundrum – Dealey Plaza exists, it has exact parameters. That rifle – we know how long it took to reload, how fast the bullets travelled, and we thought, 'Here's something that videogames can actually do and do really well'."

There are aspects of *JFK Reloaded* which make it an uncomfortable proposition. The bullet-cam replays (which Ewing defends as being "just like CSI") have upset many, and the prize fund (up to $100,000) for the most accurate reconstruction of the shots is perhaps a step too far, but otherwise *JFK Reloaded* demonstrates how game technology can explore reality more meaningfully than it has up until now.



PARTY

Konami gets into Gear

Launch of Snake's final PS2 mission is celebrated with glitz, girls and 'gators

In celebration of the Japanese version's completion and the American release's apparent success (Konami claims more than a million copies had sold before Thanksgiving), VIPs and media were crammed into the 40th floor of Konami's Roppongi Hills building on November 25 for the Snake Eater Premium Preview.

Ken Kutaragi made an appearance to thank Konami for support of Sony, while Hideo Kojima himself was a reserved presence, preferring to converse with the other stage guests. They included *MGS* series artist Yoji Shinkawa and film director Ryuhei Kitamura (responsible for *The Twin Snakes'* action sequences), together as a plug for Kitamura's upcoming Godzilla film, for which Shinkawa will provide mechanical design – also referred to with a Godzilla dialogue sequence within *MGS3*.

In fact, *MGS3* has been thoroughly infiltrated by product placement: the Japanese idol magazine Sabra is donating five of its covergirls for in-game pinups, while Otsuka, a Japanese food company, has its Calorie Mate biscuits included as Snake's starting rations (only the chocolate version is featured, with Kojima disclosing that Solid Snake has a sweet tooth). The Triumph motorcycle licence also makes an appearance, and, at the other pole of the style scale, so do Sony's *Ape Escape* mascots, with surreal results.



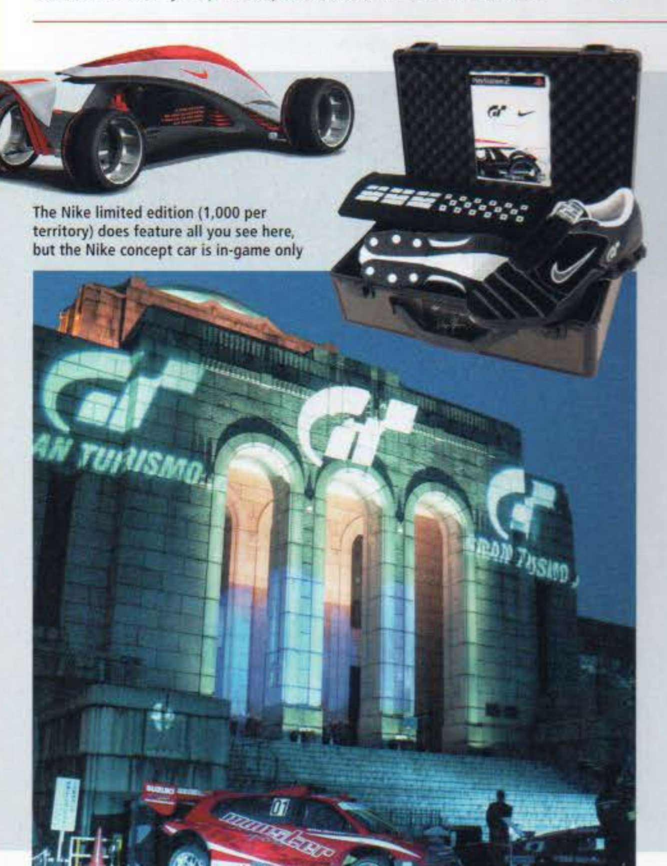
Left: The Japanese special edition of *MGS3* features a period mech piece, but sadly not Snake's crocodile headwear (above), which will be modelled in an inner-city advertising campaign







Above, in descending height: Kitamura, Kojima and Shinkawa – joined by Sabra girls, Godzilla and Piposaru (top) for the photo opportunity of the century. The poster (left) was equally unlikely



The Nike limited edition (1,000 per territory) does feature all you see here, but the Nike concept car is in-game only

PARTY

GT4 takes Flight

Polyphony's obsessive driving epic stalls slightly on its maiden drive

Such was the pride – and relief – of SCEI at the completion of *GT4's* production that the space in front of the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery (a downtown Tokyo art museum) played host to an automobile festival on November 9, dubbed 'Gran Turismo 4: The First Flight'. Dozens of official racing cars and prototypes, some flown in on the day for the privilege, were on display, with Polyphony head Kazunori Yamauchi clearly in his element. Under a 600-seat gala tent he gave a brief talk outlining details of the final version of *GT4*, and demonstrated the new B-spec AI driving mode – albeit not entirely successfully, with some glaringly noticeable AI glitches suggesting that the build was perhaps not entirely final. Indeed, a little over a week later the release of *GT4* was delayed from December 3 to 28.

This final, final version is set for release on a double-layer DVD-ROM filled to its 9Gb capacity (compared to GT3's 4.7Gb total), containing 700 cars and 55 playable tracks (15 extra tracks appear as scenic backgrounds for the photo mode). The game's various shops have been streamlined to be more appealing to players who are not necessarily 'customisation enthusiasts', and continuing on that theme, Yamauchi's closing announcement after declining questions on *GT4's* online mode or the PSP's *GT4 Mobile* was of his pet project, *GT4 For Boys*. Intended to instil the passion for automobiles in a pre-driving age audience, it will be a feature-stripped, friendlier version of *GT4*. Yamauchi revealed that he would like to distribute the game to children for free – a sentiment that drew strained smiles from the attendant SCEI execs.



Sadly not up for a limited-edition run were the sit-in cabinets. The full *GT4* wheel-and-pedal setup makes for an exhilarating drive, though the rollcage proved, thankfully, just for show



MOBILE

Japanese dev dials into 3G

2004 has been a big year for Japan's mobile gaming market, and 2005 looks set to continue that trend







The third-generation mobile network has been established in Japan for some time now, with Japanese Vodafone pushing heavily towards 3D gaming on its 3G format while incumbent telecommunications giant NTT DoCoMo rested on its widespread, but technically inferior i-mode market. Though late to the 3G scene, DoCoMo managed to turn the situation back to its favour with its FOMA 3G line, courting the likes of Square Enix to supply software for the service's launch. The FOMA 900i series debuted with preloaded 3G versions of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, but it was Square Enix's production of a handset-specific *Final Fantasy VII* spinoff, *Before Crisis*, that signified the publishing giant's recognition of the booming 3G market.

A fairly classical action-RPG at heart, playing out as bouts of map exploration broken by battle scenes, *Before Crisis* does, however, play to the medium's strengths beyond the sharp audiovisual presentation. Gathering materia to augment attacks is achieved by taking photographs with the phone's camera, which are then analysed for a dominant colour to create a corresponding materia. Networked play in up to four-person parties, instant messaging and trading of materia are supported, and the streaming content delivery method is intended to support continued expansion of the game's storyline.

With close to four million 900i handsets sold over the launch year, DoCoMo has wasted little time in bringing an upgraded FOMA 901i to market, featuring improved data transfer and 3D capabilities – improved enough that several developers are already working on MMORPG titles. Many of Japan's major games developers are looking to mobile-specific development, while alternately the low overheads of mobile content creation are empowering start-ups formed by refugees from those same developers. The 901i announcement has so far received support in the form of safe, if graphically impressive, commitment from Bandai and Hudson, providing a Gundam action game and another outing for Bomberman (in full 3D) respectively.







Two approaches to 3G visuals: *Ginga Nanakai Monogatari* (left group) uses the 901i's onboard 3D capabilities, whereas the 900i's *Before Crisis* (right group) loads prerendered 2D to differing effect. Western infrastructure and handset technology will soon be catching up with what is currently playing out in Japan

A more novel offering is smaller player Ubiquitous Entertainment's *Ginga Nanakai Monogatari* (roughly *Story Of The Galaxy Of The Seven Oceans*), a space-bound MMORPG that uses a play-by-email system to allow even the busiest potential players to enjoy the game in five- or ten-minute intervals of attention. Each action a player makes is transmitted to the game server and, if playing cooperatively, the rest of the player's fleet: safety in phone numbers comes into play if the player is attacked while unable to use their phone, as all other members of their fleet will also receive the warning mail and have the opportunity to respond.

Playing coop, actions are transmitted to the rest of the player's fleet: if he is attacked while unable to get to his phone, other members of the fleet will be able to respond

While the staggering number of mobile users, and thus mobile revenue, is an obvious draw to Japanese game developers, there's evidence that the unique communication, interaction and distribution options the medium provides are also being taken into account. Eastern alarm over mobile gaming being a threat to traditional gaming may yet fade to happy coexistence.



OUT THERE



SHOOT TO KILL

Live-Shot **is a self-professed 'new concept' in internet gaming. We can't disagree, as we've never seen another site offering you remote control over a distant firearm before, let alone one that promises you the chance to point, click and gun down far-away animals. The guns are mounted at a secluded ranch in – where else? – Texas, along with a host of web cameras that allow you to view the range's inhabitants before you execute them. Animals as disparate as sheep, antelope and, ah, more sheep can be viewed, gunned down and (for a premium fee, obviously) their carcasses retrieved for trophies. All very wholesome, we're sure, and a fine, bloody, destructive way to spend those skillz you've been honing in *Counter-Strike*.**

● www.live-shot.com

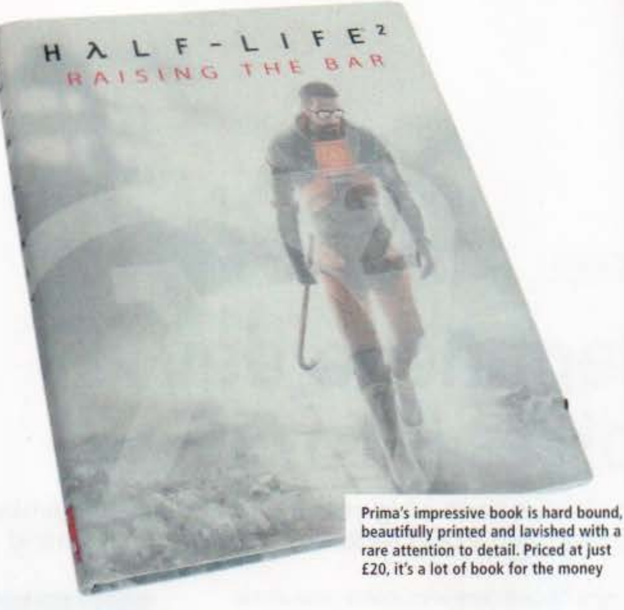
BOOK

Valve Raises The Bar

If you thought the Half-Life 2 story began and ended on a DVD in your PC, prepare to reassess the picture

While browsing the development sketches and reading story fragments penned by Valve's in-house writer Marc Laidlaw, it's clear that Valve possesses frightening reserves of imagination. Witness Mr Friendly, a 'Cthulhuesque dog with a fairly obvious phallus', designed to elicit a homophobic response. Yet the most telling quote from Prima's lavish visual history of *Half-Life* and its sequel is from **Gabe Newell**: "It doesn't matter what we cut, so long as we cut it and it gives us the time to focus on other things, because any of the options will be bad unless they're finished, and any of them will be good if they're finished."

Raising The Bar is a gorgeous visual history of Valve, taking in its early B-movie experiments to the first brief outlines for *Half-Life 2* and beyond. Every sketch and storyboard is complemented by a brief short story or small snippet of information that expands on what was intended or what the player should read into the games. Alongside that, there's a fascinating insight into Valve's own design methods. Touching stories abound: from where Eli's face originated (an elderly man panhandling for work on the street) and small insights to the deliberately clouded story (naming Kleiner's pet headcrab after Hollywood legend Hedy Lamarr).



Prima's impressive book is hard bound, beautifully printed and lavished with a rare attention to detail. Priced at just £20, it's a lot of book for the money

Entire chapters are devoted to levels and spaces cut from the final game, and ideas pour out – all of them entertaining, each worthy of inclusion within a game. But that's the point. This volume not only catalogues *Half-Life 2*, but the *Half-Life 2* that could have been. It's a testament to Valve's ideas that we want to play both games.

Prima's Half-Life 2: Raising The Bar (ISBN 0 761 543643) is on sale now.



Continue

Nintendo's DS
We love the smell of new hardware in the morning

The PC's second wind
So many big games, so little hard drive space

The festive season
Videogaming elbows its way in under the tree

Quit

Dodgy importers
Why do people still buy from unknown sources?

HL2 authentication
Maybe *HL3* will go with a special decoder wheel

The festive season
And indie games vanish in the chart scrum. Humbug

Author: M John Harrison
Publisher: Gollancz
isbn: 0 575 07593 7

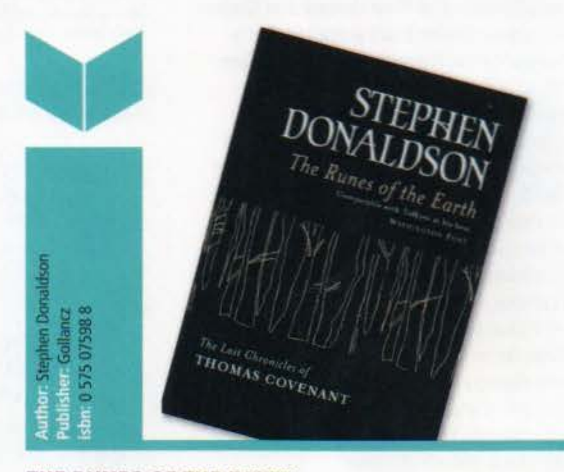


THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPEN

Short stories from an author whose tales create a resonance that is very real

The best analogy for the atmosphere provided by this collection of M John Harrison's short stories is the cover. A detail from one of Stanley Spencer's classic resurrection paintings, it encapsulates the same strange juxtaposition between a decaying reality and the promise of another type of existence as Harrison's prose. Significantly, in between is a position Harrison has often found himself in the world of books – locked somewhere between the neo-sci-fi of an Iain M Banks and the scientific literary bent of a Martin Amis. Which, perhaps, is why the intensity of the short story seems to suit his style so well. Comprising 24 tales, which range in vintage from 1975 to 2000, there's a remarkable consistency to Things That Never Happen. The protagonists are often 30-something men possessed of a certain nervous energy. Attracted by fast German cars, seedy back alley pubs and the thrill of physical danger, they patrol favoured locations: London's Soho or Kings Cross; Manchester's Deansgate; Huddersfield or the Yorkshire moors. But under the surface of their misanthropic lives, there's the crackle of alternative energy. Whether it's found in the rituals of mysterious migrants, the whispered evidence of the existence of an imaginary place or the fragmentation of dreams into surreality, the strength of the book is Harrison's demand that the reader seriously considers this is how life is, at least for some people. And if the denouements are seldom happy, the results of their unravelling continue to linger long after the book is shut.

Author: Stephen Donaldson
Publisher: Gollancz
isbn: 0 575 07598 8



THE RUNES OF THE EARTH

The start of the final trilogy in the Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever

There must be few things worse for the serious fantasy writer than to be compared to Tolkien. Add Mervyn Peake and Wagner's Ring Cycle to the list and things quickly get untenable. In a sense, however, there is value in attempting to measure the works of Stephen Donaldson against such figures, even when he's found wanting. His double trilogy of the Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever, completed 20 years ago, ushered in a new type of fantasy, as anti-hero Covenant, a leprous borderline psychotic, finds himself heralded as the saviour of a magical land he doesn't even believe exists. But the question raised by The Runes Of The Earth, the first part of the final trilogy, is whether Donaldson was wise to return to the scene of past triumph. With Covenant dead, his mantle has passed to his lover Linden Avery. A doctor who looks after Covenant's mad ex-wife as well as her son, adopted from the cult who killed Covenant, she is drawn back to the world to complete its salvation from the despiser, Lord Foul. Of course, compared to the richness of the lore and history of Middle Earth, it ranks as pretty thin stuff. In particular, it's hard not to find some of the modernising touches laughable – Lord Kevin Landwaster being a prime example. Donaldson also seems to get hung up on bits of vocabulary, with 'puissant' cropping up with strange frequency. Yet there is the potential for better things to come in the remaining books, although it's harder to see a new audience being won over.



DEVELOPER DIARY

Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades continues his next-gen push

For the first time in more than two years, Nina, Mike and I, still at Just Add Monsters at the time, hit the road armed with a full design, a business plan, and a nice little trailer to pitch our *Heavenly Sword* concept to a few choice publishers.

"We are Just Add Monsters and our last game was *Kung Fu Chaos.*"

A warm blank stare welcomes us from our first publisher representative.

"It was a firstparty Xbox exclusive," I continue.

"Oh, I see, I only have a PlayStation2. How many units did it sell?"

Oh, crap.

It's a harsh place, the games business. You really are only as good as your last game. And by 'good' I'm talking about sales. Make a bad game that sells well and you are the bee's knees. Make a good game that

It's a harsh place, the games business. You really are only as good as your last game. I'm talking about sales. Make a bad game that sells well and you are the bee's knees

sells badly and you can almost hear the cogs of industry turning against you. Back to the pitches...

"We are Just Add Monsters and our last game was *Kung Fu Chaos.*"

So far, so good.

"We are here to present our next-generation game concept."

"Next-gen? Do you mean PSP?"

Oh boy.

It's a funny place, the games business. Despite the fact that a first-class game can easily take three or more years to craft, there are many who cannot see beyond their next financial year.

Next up:

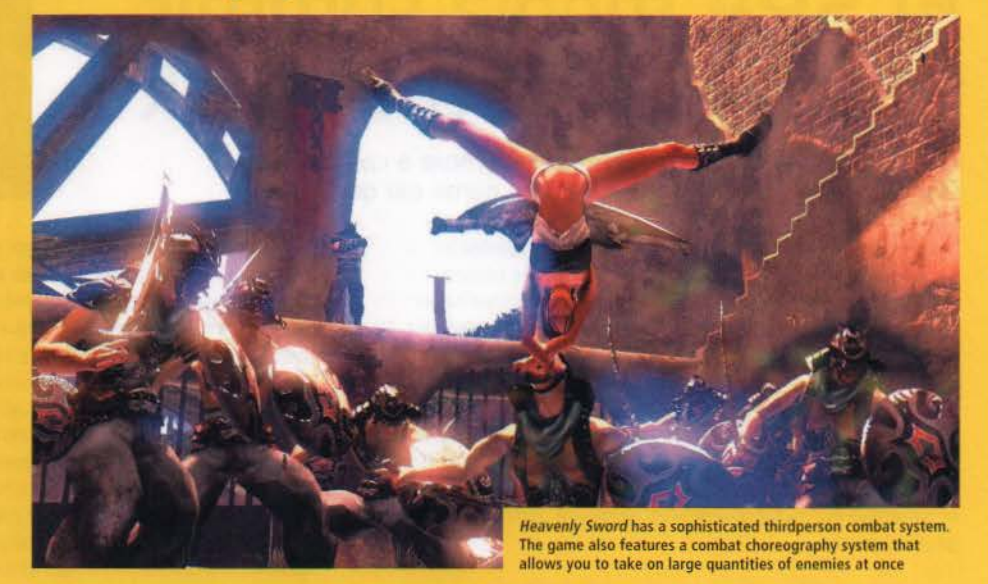
"...our last game was *Kung Fu Chaos,*" I beam.

"That was a great game!" he exclaims. "Our guys where just commenting the other day what a great job your team did!"

'Yeah, you guys should know. You tried to screw us over when we pitched it to you, remember?' I thought to myself behind my winning smile.

It's a one-sided place, the games business. Publishers are our bankers, marketers and creative gods all rolled into one. Burning bridges with publishers is not something you can do lightly.

Despite all that, by the end of our presentations,



Heavenly Sword **has a sophisticated thirdperson combat system. The game also features a combat choreography system that allows you to take on large quantities of enemies at once**

particularly when we showed them our trailer and our early-bird strategy, the response was uncanny. By uncanny, I mean good. By good, I mean unbelievably amazing. No game any of us had ever pitched before had been met with the enthusiasm we witnessed in those dull, audiovisually-challenged meeting rooms. A few even invited us back to show more people and brought in sandwiches, cakes and pop! This crucial sign always means that they want to do business with you. In one case they were leftovers from a previous meeting but still... it was nice of them to let us eat it.

As we followed up with meetings and worked our way up the publishing chain, we started hitting dead ends: "We think that starting with a team of 23 is too small for a next-gen game."

It is an unrealistic place, the games business. I'm not sure there are many development teams of 30-50 talented individuals with a previous hit on their hands, twiddling their thumbs having completed a killer demo. This attitude alone will kill off most indies and it's not one that will change. Developers beware. The barrier to entry has just won the X-prize.

"We think your gameplay features are too ambitious. Perhaps you could simplify it and make it more like..." ...something that is a clone of a successful game that will be so derivative and underwhelming by the time the next-gen consoles are out that no one, including yourselves, will give a damn, perhaps? It's a conservative place, the games business. OK, more:

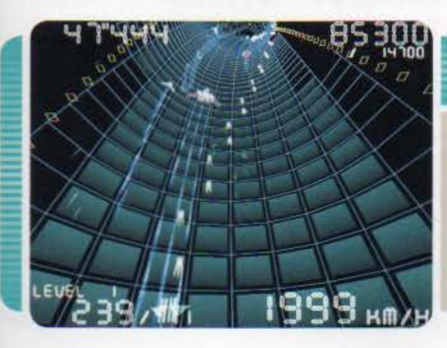
"We love the ambition and production goals, but can you do it for [a third of the budget it would cost to develop]." Yes, we'd love to do that! Straight after I smash out all my teeth out with a hammer. Yep, the games business is oxymoronic.

And here's my favourite: "We will not fund a prototype but we are happy to direct you while you develop it."

F. U. C. K. O. F. F. It's a take-the-piss kind of place, the games business.

Summer of 2003 is fading and it looks like we'll have to self-fund our prototype and aggressively pitch it to the big boys for this to work. It will need to be an amazing playable demo for platforms that don't exist; yet one that looks, sounds and feels better than any game currently out there. This would be our biggest gamble yet.

Next month I want to tell you about the true cost of transitioning to next-generation development and it has nothing to do with money, technology, art pipelines or any of the other usual suspects, and it very nearly ripped our team apart. Stay tuned.



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Torus Trooper

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/tt_e.html

Kenta Cho's legion of fans will recognise his style instantly from the screenshot on the left, but his new game, *Torus Trooper*, has a twist. Not in the obvious sense, although your ship does race along a endless twirling loop rather than climbing a vertical plane. Instead, it's a gameplay twist: you have infinite lives but not infinite time; die as often as you like, but each death will knock 15 seconds off the clock and once it hits zero the game is over. Your continually dwindling stock of time can be replenished by killing bosses and amassing points, meaning that the game lasts as long as your skill does. Alternate routes test your reflexes and hide high-scoring opportunities. There are, however, no power-ups. Everything on the screen wants you dead.

It may only be a microscopic refinement of the rules of the 2D shooter, but it's presented with such clear confidence and mathematical beauty that it's more than enough. As ever, the central question remains how something so nerve-knottingly stressful can, at the same time, be so hypnotically soothing.

ELSPA media summit falls wide of the mark

The Media Meets Gaming day proves more a case of Gaming Meets Itself to talk over the same old questions

ELSPA's Media Meets Gaming event held in London in November was a timely chance to reflect on relations between the gaming and media industries. After Roger Bennett's rather busy summer, thanks – mostly – to the *Manhunt* furore, this summit was pitched as an opportunity to discuss new ways of promoting and commissioning 'interactive entertainment'.

The event programming initially appeared unsurprisingly defensive, and so perhaps indirectly there appeared to be very little media and far too much gaming, an unwanted imbalance given the proposed goal of greater collaboration. The day itself took the form of a series of presentations, each based around a different aspect of working in games or media.

Gerhard Florin, MD of European publishing for Electronic Arts, began the day with a two-pronged slant on reasons to fear gaming and reasons to love it, in which the latter part was a neat reworking of the former. However, his generalised metaphors such as 'Those who burned books could not read' rather demeaned the quality of his argument, which was essentially that games are misunderstood. It seemed exasperatingly appropriate that an audience who might have been enlightened by this was sadly absent.

A more positive, analytical treatise came from Mike Morris, joint MD of Channel 4 International, which addressed the vastly different commercial scenarios that might arise when digital television technologies begin to align with gaming experiences. Most attendees seemed to agree with his idea of a post-linear world: where TV and game content is consumed in a fragmented way from multiple media and gaming technologies.

Some unique projects were highlighted, bridging the space between media and gaming, alongside the more familiar but not yet matured likes of Time Commanders

Sean Dromgoole, CEO of Some Research, gave a statistical enquiry that fell a little short of its stated intention: 'How to make gaming as exciting as music and film in the media'. There seemed little point in the torrent of games-related statistics that befell an audience long tired of telling itself that 'gaming is bigger than film', and it furthered the sense of an industry on its back heel. The notion of selling gaming to media with its 'stars' such as Peter Molyneux or Will Wright seemed problematic given the game developer stereotype.

Ian Livingstone's typically ebullient talk refreshed a post-lunch crowd, with many still hungry for something to get their teeth into. The bite came from Matt Locke, director of creative research and development at the BBC, and was the understated highlight of the day. He discussed, in quite direct terms, the unique challenges associated with working on videogame projects for large institutions, such as developing relationships with older commissioning editors, and the excellent opportunity afforded to game makers who work outside of gaming but in media companies. Some unique projects were highlighted, bridging the space between media and gaming, alongside the more familiar but not yet matured Fightbox and Time Commanders television programmes.

A rather tense panel discussion rounded off the day, with the solitary newspaper journalist in the room taking a well-reasoned swipe at the creative vacuum in much game PR, and offering the by no means new idea of giving each game a 'hook' to bring it to a wider audience. Some reluctant agreement was reached on this point, but the day's wider issues still needed resolving in a different format. ELSPA must be applauded for its thinking with this event, but its actions did not quite meet the same standard.

Ian Livingston delivered his presentation with characteristic passion, while *Rome: Total War* (top) earned more plaudits



AT A STORE NEAR YOU

Games hitting UK shelves this month

Zelda: Four Swords Adventures

FORMAT: GC REVIEWED IN: E136 SCORE: 9/10



'Every single moment of *Four Swords* is magically familiar and every single moment is dazzlingly fresh. Put simply, it's everything you hoped it would be... utterly absorbing'

The Chronicles Of Riddick

FORMAT: PC REVIEWED IN: E140 SCORE: 7/10 (XBOX VERSION)



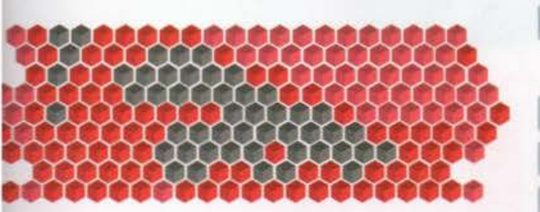
'*Riddick* never fails to impress and immerse. It's a compact, muscular and single-minded piece of work. Flawed, yes, but so confident and independent that it's hard not to like'





BBC2's Fightbox, though flawed, was seen as a promising avenue for bringing games and television closer





REDEYE IS...

Installing Half-Life 2



The lights on the modem flash send and receive, but still nothing. Come on, come on, it's not like RedEye's getting any younger. Actually, it turns out he is, after a childhood accident involving a Back To The Future video and an unfortunately timed lightning strike. Gene sequence spliced with a supernova and Doc Emmet Brown's mad science, he glitches in and out of ages like skyscrapers in *San Andreas*. It only happened because the VHS was one of the first with copy protection, back when home videotaping was killing the fatcat movie industry, long before suprnova.org actually did. It didn't stop copying, just occasionally screwed up the tracking on legitimate copies, leading to fury from honest customers who'd paid for redundant goods, and a stupid, youthful RedEye trying to solve the problem logically by shoving his hand in a player still wired to the mains. Whirr, crack, kaboom: Great Scott!

The profit-making pirates were unaffected, of course – their technology was always on a generational par with the movie studios, and besides they had enough contacts to get prints before the copy protection was ever applied. This is not an unfamiliar story; videogame fans have been dealing with similar irritations for 20 years, from words in manuals and codewheels, through density-based copylock to 25-digit serial numbers. Now Valve has upped the anti, because super-smash **Edge** 10/10 *Half-Life 2* won't let you play without laborious online authentication. RedEye's been patiently waiting to authenticate for 35 minutes, and, y'know, he's not getting any younger.

Personal frustrations at wanting everything now-now-now aside, this is not black and white. On the one hand, publishers crushing plucky developers with cynically calculated, barely legal late payments has been something of a motif for the industry of late, and a story about a plucky developer creating its own distribution method and royally shafting a publisher could prove uplifting. On the other, being unable to play the game you've just bought until you've taken a military-grade security test to prove you've bought it is as demeaning as it is frustrating. On the one hand anyone with any sense wants a greater slice of the profit to go to the creatives. On the other, there's no proof yet that this will stop piracy any more than the codewheels, any more than the VHS methods that started the chain that messed up RedEye's DNA.

Upping the stakes: on the one hand, *Half-Life 2* is awesome, apparently; RedEye still wouldn't know, but he's heard tell from people more grounded in PC patience than he is. On the other is personal freedom. Precedents are dangerous, and even if Valve's system is flawless, the prospect of, say, Vivendi taking Valve's lead and installing its own authentication system on RedEye's already-quaking PC is absolutely terrifying. Punishing protection will only go away if users refuse to buy into it. RedEye picks his side, cancels the installation, and makes a stand.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with those of ***Edge*** *magazine*

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (PAL)

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
EXPECTED: MARCH



As with *MGS2*, Kojima proves his Europhilia (it's a Joy Division thing) by saving the best for the last release: a boss rush mode, movie viewer 'and more' are promised, as well as extra bug fixes

Shinsengumi Gunrouden

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: SEGA
EXPECTED: FEBRUARY



Another Red-designed, effects-laden action title – and that's no criticism – *Gunrouden*'s flourish is the ability to sidestep attacks in any of four directions, allowing elaborate counter-dances

Tekken 5

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
EXPECTED: Q1 2005



The PS2 port of Namco's return to Iron Fist form will see a PAL release as early as the summer, with an action-adventure mode claimed to be more intricate than previous *Tekken Force* entries

Mario Baseball

FORMAT: GC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: 2005



Mario picks up a new sport under the tutelage of Namco, which brings its expertise in baseball titles for the PS2 to the Mushroom Kingdom: story, trophy, versus and minigame modes will feature

Code Age

FORMAT: TBA
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
EXPECTED: TBA



An ambiguous 'New Brand Concept' in a *DQVII*-bundled teaser, Square Enix's new original title – or titles, as four trademarks have been registered – has generated cautious enthusiasm

Rainbow 6: Lockdown

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: 2005



Avoiding a potentially embarrassing retro Nintendo vibe, the newly subtitled *Rainbow 6 4* is a Red Storm and Ubi Montreal co-development. Both consoles will receive unique online modes



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

And the winner is...

Koji Aizawa, editor in chief of Famitsu PS2 magazine, takes a look at the end-of-year releases

The end of the year is the most important period for the Japanese games industry, much like in the rest of the world. And, as you already know, this year is special. On November 27, the king of the RPGs, *Dragon Quest VIII*, was unleashed. But a few days after, on December 2, it was followed by the launch of the Nintendo DS, and it is going to be the turn of the PSP no less than a week after (as I'm writing this column, it is December 6). There has been a big new event, a big new launch every week – something that had become rare lately.

By the way, let's talk a little about the DS and the PSP. Well, in Japan it appears that gamers have chosen to embrace the DS while the PSP is drawing the attention of a wider audience. Of course, it is too soon to be definitive on these trends, but this is what it appears like on the market right now. And at their prices – the DS costs ¥15,000 (£75) and the PSP ¥19,800 (£100) – let's be honest, if these prices may appear expensive compared to previous systems, they are not when you consider all the features included in both new portables. It appears as if people are getting the idea, and whatever is put on the market at this end of the year should sell out rapidly. Personally, I'm having lots of fun with Sega's *Kiminotamenara Shineru* [*Feel The Magic XY/XX* – see p94] on my DS, and I'm not the only one – at home, it's been getting a lot of attention, even from people who don't normally play games much. On PSP, I see one big title: *Ridge Racers*. The game is amazing, and seems to deliver so much of PSP's potential so early. It's even more impressive to see such a game running if you know that its development was hurried because of delays at Sony: Namco received the development tools late. Playing the game, you wouldn't guess this at all.

With so many titles in such a short period, it is still difficult to see which will appear as the clear winners. There's necessarily a limit on budgets, so one thing is for sure: it's going to be very difficult for gamers and their wallets

But ultimately – and I guess you'll hear this very often – everything comes back to *Dragon Quest*. Though we call it an RPG, I suppose from the perspective of a gamer in the UK it is more like a straight adventure game. But thanks to Level 5's knowhow, the quality and technical achievement of this eighth instalment goes way beyond anyone's expectations. I'm already 50 hours deep into the game, but I still feel lots of enjoyment in the face of such high accomplishment. The game sold more than 2.2 million copies in just two days – these are not the shipment figures, but the actual number of copies sold to customers. This is a new record for PlayStation2 software.

As I said, we are not finished yet with high-profile releases for this end-of-year period. There are still a lot more in the pipeline for December: *Metal Gear Solid 3* [reviewed on p80], *Tales of Rebirth*, *Gran Turismo 4* – we don't lack blockbusters this year, that's for sure! Shelves and release plans are filled with big sequels to popular series, many promising to sell a million copies or more. And if you consider the fiscal year, the list gets even longer. Bandai's new Gundam games, Koei's historical simulations, Square Enix's board game (Itadaki Street Special), Konami's baseball, EA's *FIFA*, Banpresto's *Super Robot Taisen* on GC... To that you also add previously released games which still have strong sales, like love adventure *True Heart 2* or the numerous hits on GBA, or ever *Mario Party 6* on GC, which is not showing any sign of weakening. With so many titles in such a short period, it is still difficult to see which ones wi appear as the clear winners. If there is no lack of appealing titles, there's necessarily a limit on people's budgets, so one thing is for sure: it's going to be a very difficult 'Christmas' for gamers and their wallets in Japan! Merry Christmas and a happy new year!



Queues to buy DS units were stretching around the block on the day of the handheld's launch in Japan. Eager gamers snapped up 230,000 units

Sony's PSP and Nintendo's DS are both now available to buy in Japan. Games such as the PSP's *Ridge Racers* (above) and *Feel The Magic : XY/XX* on DS are excellent demonstrations of the new handheld consoles' power and features

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Wipeout Pure



After the relief that Namco seems to have rediscovered its racing roots on PSP, our attention turns to our local anti-gravity racer: here's hoping for a 1,000mph launch.
PSP, SCEE

Tekken 5



The list of fighters continues to grow, with Roger Jr – a mother-and son-kangaroo combo – ensuring that our Gigaton Punch 'strategy' will be broken out of retirement.
ARCADE/PS2, NAMCO

Killer 7



Not that we think it's ever *really* going to be released, but it's obvious that, for better or worse, there'll never be another action game like the seven Smiths'.
GC/PS2, CAPCOM

Whose game is it anyway?
Small developers on big titles



If the *Knights Of The Old Republic* name is synonymous with BioWare, will Obsidian's efforts on *The Sith Lords* go unnoticed?

A sequel is always a delicate affair, but even more so when it's not just the number after the title that changes, but the team behind it. Even before the finished game – and often before the started game, in the age of community forums and online press releases – there will be dissent among fans of the developer for associating itself with an unworthy franchise, and an equal and opposite dissent among fans of the franchise convinced no unfamiliar developer could possibly do it justice.

And when that game reaches the shelves there's another problem: while being handed the reins of a stampeding franchise is undoubtedly a lifeline for an independent or startup developer looking to make its name, it's seldom that developer's name that's selling the title. Obsidian's work on *KOTOR II* looks to have all the brooding soul-searching and character nuance that was expected of its development heritage, but to an audience unaware of that heritage the developer is the Irvin Kershner to BioWare's George Lucas, a flash of splash screen before the main event begins.

In an industry of colossal marketing spends, perhaps the concept of making a buying choice based on the name under the title has become a foreign one again. Electronic Arts, once so ardent a campaigner for giving the spotlight (and the gatefold covers) to its designers and development teams, now affords box space only to the livid red brand of its vowels. And those developers who are a brand unto themselves can overshadow their collaborators – *StarCraft: Ghost* will be known by all as a Blizzard game, known by some as a Swingin' Ape game and known by fewer as a Nihilistic one.

Ultimately, though, a body of work on someone else's titles leads to the opportunities for independent development teams to receive accolades on their own terms and their own games, or at least to make a stamp that's unarguably their own on a franchise.

If Obsidian never finds a publisher to back Chris Avellone's interest in penning a present-day high-school RPG, then his appreciation of JRPG storytelling surely wouldn't be averse to bringing that into a *Shin Megami Tensei: California*.













FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **ODDWORLD INHABITANTS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JAN 25 (US), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E139, E141, E143**



Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

Hunting, profiteering and gunplay: Oddworld Inhabitants stops saving the planet and goes about building a brave new one

"Never liked guns," growls Stranger as he stomps a bandit's firearm apart during the CGI of the magnificent opening sequence. It may not be meant as a nod to the *Oddworld* series' past obsessions with slave liberation and ecology, but it feels like one. It's a necessary reminder of the studio's ideology, because the early hours of the game feel like everything's been turned on its head, with Stranger blazing from both barrels in the interest of profit and incarceration.

Oddworld has never been about offensive weapons, but is making up for lost time: *Stranger's Wrath* takes the current vogue for dual-wielding and brandishes it with just one hand, in the form of Stranger's crossbow. His already notorious preference for 'live' ammo means that Stranger fires razor-toothed rodents instead of bullets and explosive bats instead of rockets. There's enough room for two animal ammo types to perch on the crossbow at once – with both ogling you curiously before being launched to their high-impact doom – giving you two firepower options via each trigger on the pad. The role of this ammo isn't just to kill things – chippunks, for example, gabble rudely at anyone nearby, causing a distraction, while zapflies activate machinery and detonate flammable barrels – making the strategy of the pairing essential depending on what you're up to. However, since you can carry a full range of ammo at any one time, the two-gun limitation is really just an illusion.

There's enough room for two animal ammo types to perch on the crossbow at once – with both ogling you curiously before being launched to their high-impact doom

The *Oddworld* ideology resurfaces soon enough, albeit wrapped in profiteering – Stranger is rewarded with more moolah (Oddworld's currency) for subduing and capturing bounties alive, providing an instant bonus level of challenge for those who like to approach their stealth with caution and diligence. And it's this stealth that makes *Stranger's Wrath* surprisingly reminiscent of a game with one of the most undervalued sneaking systems around – *Manhunt*. Enemies are thunderously quick to respond, but equally swift to forget a trespasser who remains out of sight for a few moments. While this may seem shallow to creeping purists, in practice it feels more like a



Paralysing critters with a full-charged zapfly bolt is your initial method for hunting ammo, and the dullness of such a one-note task is staved off somewhat by each successfully downed critter reaping five or so 'bullets' at a time





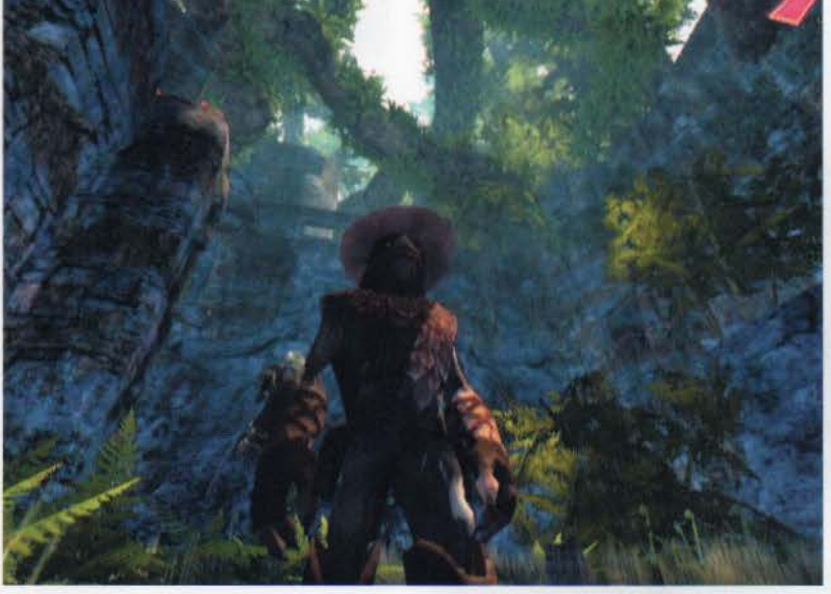


In practice, *Stranger* feels a lot like *Manhunt*, with well-defined stealth and deadly enemies that are forgetful enough to make play feel improvised





Stranger's Wrath gracefully mixes third- and firstperson play, allowing you to flick between the two views at any juncture



freedom, allowing you to carve your own organic path through the scenarios on offer.

You could, of course, choose to take the path of most resistance by storming in with both barrels squealing, but – just like *Manhunt* – worryingly few shots are required to take Stranger's life. This harshness has been fairly balanced, however, thanks to a recharging stamina bar that's actually *Halo*'s shield system in disguise – and then some. Secondary to your vital life meter, it's used to buffer Stranger when taking falls, or using a continuous series of intense melee moves. However, it's worth rationing, because if you manage to find a quiet spot in the fracas, you can convert any remaining stamina into health by 'shaking' off the damage, with Stranger thumping himself violently in the chest. One of many excellent and charismatic touches, it means that any confrontational set-piece won't leave you near to death and reconsidering the most recent checkpoint, and allows you to approach any situation as aggressively or carefully as you please. It makes boss fights tense and tight, allowing for the stronger enemies to pose a severe threat without it feeling like the typical mismatch of Player vs Goliath. In fact, bosses come packing both a health and stamina bar. Whichever one you choose to whittle down – via dazing or damaging attacks – dictates whether you'll take them in dead or alive.

The game's first major scenario, staged in a staggeringly large waterworks facility within a dust-choked valley, encapsulates all of this and more. There's a supreme sense of freedom to approach from your own strategic angle, an intimidating number of bandits on patrol, and a boss encounter that can be fought out as a close-up, bloody-minded strafing gunfight, or as a bitty war of attrition across the whole valley itself, or anything in between. Visually, the blue mist of *Munch's Oddysee* has lifted, revealing a game with zero loading times or draw-in. The scale and detail means that *Stranger* is, remarkably, even prettier in the flesh than early footage and shots promised.

By necessity, some previews can consist of little more than a fuzz of talked-up potential and possibilities, but there's a reason why our comments here are so committal and assured: the code we've sampled feels remarkably finished and smear-free. Every indication is that all the game needs – and all the time Oddworld Inhabitants has to give it – is a few more weeks of refinement. If first impressions count, then *Stranger's Wrath* could be counting to something very impressive out of ten.



Radars Of The Fine Art

Stranger's Wrath seems to have its semiotics pinned down well, with every aspect of its stealth and battle system illustrated in a clean and precise manner. The radar covers a massive sweep of land – including guards' status and vantage points – without feeling cluttered, and there's a simple rule with regard to taking a fall: if you can see the ground, you'll survive the drop. When Stranger is concealed, a bar at the bottom of the screen says, simply, 'Hidden', removing any ambiguity involved in stalking a target. A halo of coloured stars is used to indicate an enemy's vulnerability, with yellow representing how dazed they are, with three needed for a guaranteed capture. Red indicates damage, allowing you to tiptoe around the wounded when aiming for zero fatalities.



FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL DESIGN**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2005**



TimeSplitters: Future Perfect

Monkeys, mummies, maniacs and mutants all make a triumphant return. But will it be the Mapmaker that steals the limelight this time around?

If this preview merely discussed the new *TimeSplitters'* Mapmaker it would fill you with joy, excitement and yearning. PC gamers have long been able to intensify their appreciation of a given game with editing tools and suites, but while a few console games have provided map editors there's been nothing to rival *Future Perfect's* suite of design tools. It's incredible.

Of course, this is Free Radical's third version, but it now appears to be the real deal. Memory-saving fixes enable users to build levels twice the size of those possible in *TimeSplitters 2*, and one of the major improvements is the ability to fuse together tiles from any of the time periods. But that's not all. "Previously the type of blocks we had, and the way they fitted together, tended to dictate what kind of maps could be produced," laments **David Doak**, Free Radical's managing director. "The limitations of the plugs forced a certain way of building. Now there's only one kind of plug." A universal plug, if you will. Previously Mapmaker was a mean kind of Airfix, with part 1b attaching only to parts 12h or 6f. Now it's Lego, with all the simplicity and scope that implies. Large rooms, created out of smaller tiles, are no longer compromised by a swathe of annoying pillars; they can now be as architecturally simple or as complex as you want them to be. "We asked users what they wanted; they just said big open spaces," chuckles Doak.

It's possible to create singleplayer levels, multiplayer assault maps, deathmatch arenas or challenges to keep you amused. It's possible to set up proximity-triggered sentry guns, even customise their arc of their movement. It's possible to create ambient lighting, flickering corridors or player-controlled switches that can plunge areas of your map into darkness. It's possible to build upwards as well as outwards, creating sniper points for campers, open up sections to the sky, even customise the weather: rain, snow, brilliant sunshine, whatever you decide. It's also possible to use basic game logic to trigger special events, even flash up short messages. You could create the most foul-mouthed level ever devised.

What's even more impressive is that Mapmaker 3 is going online. Free Radical hopes to create a community that's every bit as vibrant as those of *Counter-Strike*, *Quake* or *Thief*, but for a new generation of console gamers. *Future Perfect* will come with ten

It's possible to build upwards as well as outwards, creating sniper points for campers, open up sections to the sky, even customise the weather: rain, snow, brilliant sunshine



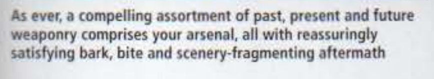




Infiltrating a supervillain's home turf with suave, cross-dressing Harry Tipper (top) invites tiptoes-and-headshots stealth, but commandeering a jeep (left) is a slightly louder option






As ever, a compelling assortment of past, present and future weaponry comprises your arsenal, all with reassuringly satisfying bark, bite and scenery-fragmenting aftermath





Conversation pieces

Future Perfect's singleplayer game is laden with humorous moments, most of which are provided by eavesdropping on enemies before the bullets start flying. Nearly all the NPCs will chatter idly, discussing a range of subjects from embarrassing initiation rituals to scatological problems. These asides, however, are not just comical: they give this game a texture and sense depth missing from the hollow story modes of the previous two games.

maps of varying complexity to give users both insight and inspiration. "The Assault maps are likely to evolve," adds Doak. "A server popularity ranking will tell you which maps are good. You can then download them into Mapmaker and mess around, tweak and improve them."

Although Free Radical is proud of its earlier *TimeSplitters* singleplayer campaigns, it has recognised that they lacked focus and direction. While *Future Perfect* sticks to the time-hopping premise, it's going to feel less disjointed. A *Second Sight* level of scripting and backstory should help, and there are plenty of Bill And Ted-style time paradoxes to make things clip along and fit together with greater finesse. Cortez, the returning hero, often meets himself in levels – provoking comic situations and the kind of time puzzles missing from the previous games.

Levels include an island castle under bombardment in 1924, a Russian facility in the '50s, ancient Egypt, the near future and the far future of 2401. *Halo*'s influence is very evident: grenades are now assigned to the shoulder/trigger button and you can also climb into vehicles either as driver or rear gunner. Current evidence suggests *Future Perfect* is more channelled than *Halo*, but its frenzied run-and-gun flavour is no bad thing.

Which brings us on to monkeys. The Challenges and Arcade leagues were *TimeSplitters 2*'s most cherished elements and they are back with a vengeance. Once again, the cuddly simians can be shot, teased, electrocuted and even used as curling stones in *Future Perfect*'s bonus modes. A new gravity gun can also be employed to gruesome effect. One challenge asks you to behead the undead by propelling boxes across the room; run out of boxes and you have to resort to heads rolling around on the floor. You can drive remote-controlled cats, compete in buggy races and even shoot two miniguns in a splitscreen game using both analogue sticks. Though **Martin Keywood**, the game's producer, worryingly points out that this currently "makes you go blind."

The 'adult' nature of some of this content has forced an 18+ rating on the game, something that Free Radical is a bit miffed about. But since the ruling the team hasn't sanitised anything in an attempt to reach a wider demographic. If it's going to be an 18+ game they may as well go the whole hog, seems to be the attitude. Blood could well be spilt in *TimeSplitters* for the first time.

With EA on board, there's a renewed optimism at Free Radical, and with a package this broad, versatile and effervescent it's hard to predict anything but an outright sales success. After the mixed reception of *Second Sight* the future may not be perfect, but it's looking a lot rosier.


The relative calm of a one-on-one shootout is rare in *Future Perfect*'s singleplayer, but Cortez is often backed up by a supporting character who will muck in effectively






Expect to face the widest assortment of foes in a *TimeSplitters* to date, in itself no small feat given the relentless inventiveness and scope of Free Radical's artists previously. Naturally, they all blow up well



In later levels the robot patrols you meet become tougher and require an all-out EMP assault to knock them flat



The interface includes some inspired, but ultimately failed, touches, such as forming your reticule from a curve which shows how much ammo you have in your clip. The strange globular waypoint marker will be replaced in the finished co

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E142**

Project: Snowblind

The name's Denton, JC Denton. Or rather it isn't, as Snowblind leaves its Deus Ex roots behind goes Bond



Bio modes

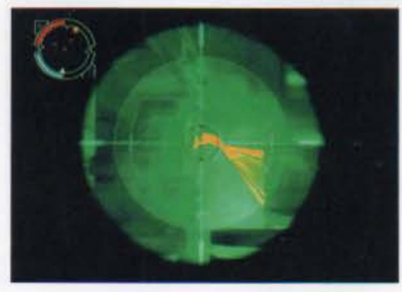
As part of his *Deus Ex* heritage, *Snowblind*'s hero, Nathan Frost, is equipped with biological mods which alter his abilities. His vision enhancement lets you see enemies, bots and cameras through walls. Reflex Boost gives you more time to dodge bullets (someone really should think of a name for that) and an energy shield gives you a little breathing space. All use bio energy, and you'll need to find batteries to refill your gauge. After the luxury of recent games that let your super-skills recharge, it's a harsh reminder of how things used to be.

Snowblind surfaced as a pleasant surprise last summer, full of soft, rich beauty and explosive, imaginative death. Now that the chance has come to spend some protracted time with the preview code, it's clear that the interest it piqued wasn't misplaced. The things that made it attractive then have all matured in a very satisfactory fashion. The Far Eastern future setting is lush and imaginative, and even those who are tiring of bloom lighting would agree that the haze of colour adds a welcome alternative to the brown boxes of most FPSs. The weapons system is as extravagant as we hoped, with even humble staples like the shotgun and sniper rifle boasting secondary functions to fire a spray of sticky grenades or spook enemies into shooting at their own men. More unusual weapons are found later in the game, like a grenade that explodes into a large energy riot shield or a gun that sticks EMP limpet mines onto passing security bots. And the men you shoot with these elaborate death-dealers are convincingly intelligent – running past your grenades to trigger alarm switches and commandeering mounted emplacements when their gunners get shot.

However, among all these positives there remains a lot of work to be done. Controls, which are locked in the preview code but will be more flexible in the final release, are rather clumsy. With primary and secondary fire on the triggers, grenades are relegated to the black button, which means you can't aim and throw at the same time. The face buttons are overloaded, with the same button being used for action and reload, meaning that trying to climb a ladder with an empty gun results in a frustrating wait while you refill your chamber. Hopefully, players will also be able to calibrate stick sensitivity, as Crystal Dynamics doesn't seem to have found the crispness in the Xbox pad that other FPSs have. The interface is also cluttered, with more information than the eye can easily absorb in one rapid sweep.

Snowblind is due for a February release in the US, and there's plenty to be tinkered with before launch day arrives. The most urgent need is for the game to lose the complicated *Deus Ex* inheritance clogging up its design and concentrate on its real strengths as a blockbuster of an action game where your tactics are constantly improvised around an adaptable and inventive armoury.





Your vision bioenhancement lets you see not just enemies, but cameras and – handily – their field of vision. Combined with a sniper scope it's an unbeatable stealth combination



The Fletchette is a nasty enough weapon in its own right, but its secondary function releases a swarm of bioelectrical predators which swoop from one ill-fated enemy to the next. Soldiers are likely to turn and run if they see them approach

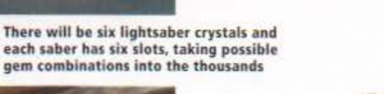




Although some events, such as the explosion which take out all of your squad (top), are scripted, the enemy AI is sufficiently unpredictable to ensure that replaying even fairly mundane encounters can still keep you on your to







There will be six lightsaber crystals and each saber has six slots, taking possible gem combinations into the thousands





Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

You're the last of the Jedi, with no clothes, weapons or friends. Force of personality is most definitely required

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E140**

The sequel to *Knights Of The Old Republic* hasn't had anywhere near the attention BioWare's opus received prior to launch. Remember all those Malak covers and eight-page previews? You can understand why, though. There's a feeling abroad that this is just more of the same. A few more characters, Force powers and branching dialogue trees aren't going to win over new converts. As deep and rewarding as the *KOTOR* universe is, this follow-up introduces no new dynamic or special hook to widen its appeal. Fans can breathe a sigh of relief.

Tweaks that have been made are definitely for the better, however. The menus have been streamlined to reduce all that flicking in and out of the action, and everything from item slots to map waypoints have been made more lucid. Along with left and right-hand slots you can set up a primary and secondary weapon configuration. Neatly, this allows you to alternate between combinations of ranged and melee weapons with the press of a single button – an elegant and much-needed alteration.

Improvements to the engine have significantly reduced loading times and almost doubled the number of enemies that can attack your party simultaneously. This should ensure key battles become a test of stand-and-fight tactics rather than running away and lobbing grenades, a factor that sometimes dogged the original. A total of ten party members now make up your team, and Obsidian promises scenarios in which you can split up the group, even sending one team away to complete its task without your supervision.

The preview code that's been made available to us includes the entire first 'level', a deserted mining colony overrun by menacing patrol droids. The first plot strand is simple and engaging, if a little clichéd. You wake up in the base and must escape before the minions of the Sith lords reach you. However, your task is complicated by the fact you have amnesia and no possessions (obviously). This first level is an excellent re-introduction to the *KOTOR* universe and certainly matches any of the scenarios cooked up by BioWare.

Even in this opening segment there's a greater sense of freedom, and you're encouraged to switch between characters frequently to complete tasks and solve puzzles – an underused element in the original. Combat is visibly more sophisticated, and once you begin rising up through the levels Force powers are given greater expression through individual animations.

After just a brief session with the game we cannot begin to assess how well *KOTOR*'s core choice dynamic has been implemented, but in terms of exploration, dialogue, combat and RPG mechanics, this is looking every bit as entertaining as the remarkable original.

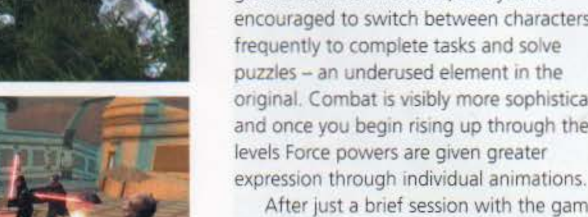
Bodies and containers already looted will display the message 'empty' if you approach – indicative of how Obsidian has streamlined the game

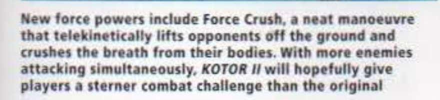


Under the influence

One new element Obsidian is introducing is the notion of influencing characters through conversation. Characters that join your party can be subtly affected not only by the Force but also by the dialogue options you choose. Get a team member on your side and they will be more willing to take orders and open up to reveal vital information. Your influence even extends to turning them toward the light or dark side of the Force depending on what your alignment is. A bit of sweet talking and verbal persuasion should even produce a crew that's entirely evil.







New force powers include Force Crush, a neat manoeuvre that telekinetically lifts opponents off the ground and crushes the breath from their bodies. With more enemies attacking simultaneously, *KOTOR II* will hopefully give players a sterner combat challenge than the original



Tales Of Eternia Online's visual style allows it to take a different approach to drawing a lush vista out to the horizon (above), and without choking to a halt, either. How tranquil the scene looks with 20 players shouting out 'A/S/L???' is another matter

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Tales Of Eternia Online

Another Japanese RPG series takes the leap into the online frontier, with Tales soon to be told by thousands at once

The east Asian market is beginning to warm to online RPGs – and Japanese developers, never ones to pass up a potentially lucrative new offshoot while the console market falters, are investing heavily in MMORPG production. It's becoming increasingly uncommon for a month to pass without a new online title announcement, with Square Enix and Koei recently joined by Hudson and now, finally, Namco.

Popular *Tales* series instalment *Tales Of Eternia* has already been tipped for conversion to DS and PSP, but Namco has recently announced the existence of a massively multiplayer PC version. It maintains a hand-drawn 2D presentation, with an isometric view for the main game switching to the traditional side-scrolling action scenes for battles, and caters for similarly traditional fourplayer parties. The characters are built from five core classes – swordsman, heavy swordsman, martial artist, healer and magician – with special classes to be unlocked and as many as 90 costume changes in preparation.

It's a gorgeous game, with city centre detail at times faintly reminiscent of a utopian, pastel-wrought *Diablo 2*





The focus of *Tales Of Eternia Online* is on cooperative play, but certain quests cater for lone players by providing accompanying NPCs, able to fight independently in battles and likely proving as impenetrable to conversation as some dedicated MMO players. Those silent types will appreciate the Emotion Chat feature, which uses an iconic representation of the character's face for communication, animating according to either the situation or player-entered cues. Also provided as an icebreaker to meeting prospective adventuring parties is the Onbu system, which allows you to recover a fallen player and piggyback them to a safe revival area. While transporting the wounded, your character is unable to run or fight, which should hopefully make the effort impressive enough to earn more than a curt 'ty' from your charge.

As well as the expected clutch of quests and random monster hunting, powerful monsters occasionally threaten towns, requiring a host of players to band together and repel the invasion. These large-scale skirmishes are viewed from an overhead perspective, with groups of players encircling





The strange bedfellows of the *Tales* aesthetics and MMO interface raise the question of how western MMO visual design might have grown had it branched from *Ultima Online*'s 2D rather than joining the fully 3D engine race

monsters in order to attack them – it's also possible for supporting players to stand outside the radius of battle and assist the front lines from a distance. Namco is still developing the mechanic for these events, and is considering adding an option to make the actual combat automatic in order to focus on the communication and strategy aspects.

Beta testing for *Tales Of Eternia Online* is scheduled to begin in early 2005, with an optimistic outlook for a mid-2005 Japanese launch. If the western appeal of the *Tales* name or the 2D visuals is unlikely to be widespread enough to justify the server costs of a localised version, the success (or failure) of its cooperative elements may yet find their way into the western MMO scene.









Both chase and in-car cameras feature, and both convey an impressive sense of speed, even without the nitro boost's slightly overbearing full-screen motion blur. Making outrageously showy 360-degree spin corners is arguably best appreciated in-car



Ridge Racers

A new Sony console, a new Ridge game: neither an official RR6 nor a straight port, it's still the prize motor on the PSP's starting line

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**

Of all the PlayStation Portable's currently revealed Japanese titles, *Ridge Racers* has capably proven itself one of the most exciting, as well as one of the few with sufficient clout to sell the PSP as a gaming machine in addition to a design statement. Certainly the most technically impressive specimen in the launch line-up, Namco claims *Ridge Racers* uses the hardware to its fullest possible specification – at least, the fullest possible in a tight launch schedule without optimised development tools and libraries, we assume the unspoken addendum goes.

Unashamedly pandering to fans, *Ridge Racers*' 12 courses (and their reverses) are reinterpretations of some of the most popular entries from the series' history, and both handling and play progression appear heavily inspired by *Ridge Racer 4* (in particular the near-effortless drift recovery, which may still prove contentious among some of the faithful). Another welcome return is a classic Namco title to play during disc access – the PS1 original's *Galaxian* replaced here by *Rally X*.

Where the game breaks from nostalgia is in the selection of cars on offer, with the previous trademark-dodging replicas replaced by a more modern line of trademark-dodging replicas. Each car model features six standard classes, with higher classes tuned for speedier performance, and one 'special' class, with the possibility of further models as unlockable rewards (we're hoping for at least a yellow Solvalu number, if not a Pac car). The new vehicles are also fitted with a nitro boost that can be refilled by performing drifts, seemingly a concession on Namco's behalf to how expertly *Burnout 2* channelled the *Ridge* driving spirit.

Ridge Racers' main play mode is World Tours, a series of two-to-six-course challenges divided into Basic, Pro and EX difficulties. Success in each tour unlocks new cars for use in future tours, and new courses for play in the single race mode. An alternate touring setup, the Arranged Tour, asks the player to specify a class of car and length of play time (the field ranges from five to 60 minutes) in order for the game to generate a one-off event perfect for a train ride, departure-lounge queue, conference call or, as some cynically observe, the console's battery life.

It's no revolution for the series, but going by the disastrously received *R: Racing*, a return to form will be taken in considerably better spirit than a change. With the PSP *Burnout* yet to solidify as a blip in the rear-view mirror, Namco has the new handheld's arcade racer market to itself (leaving *Need For Speed: Underground Rivals* and *Shutokou Battle: Zone Of Control* to battle it out for mod-racer bragging rights), but there's every indication it wants *Ridge Racers* to present itself as the best game, not just the only game.



Unmistakable *Ridge* production design informs the game down to the unique speedometers for each car. The in-house soundtrack, too, is exhilarating and fitting

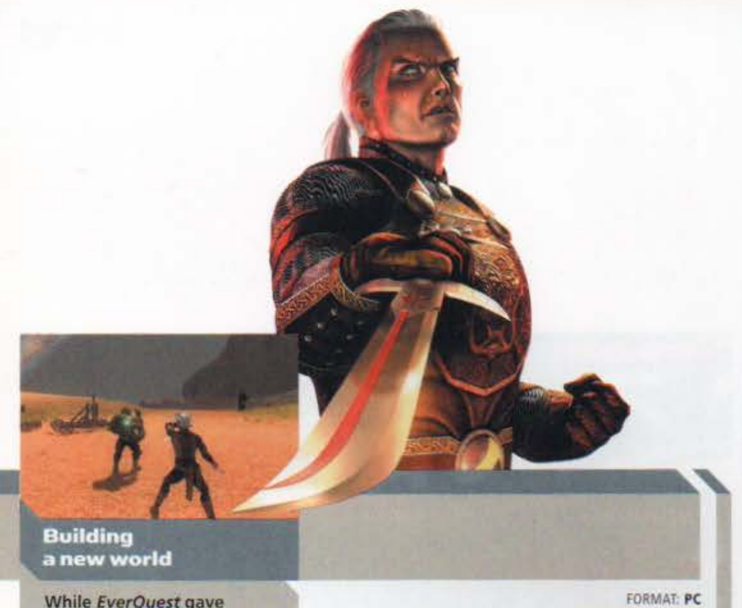


Racing queen

Long-time *Ridge* queen Reiko Nagase – whose place in many ardent admirers' hearts even transcended the admission by the *R4* CG director that he modelled her face after his own – returns for *Ridge Racers* with her bob-cut grown out and her original favourite game, *Pac-Man*, now sharing honours with *Katamari Damacy*. A virtual girl after our own hearts.



This *Rave Racer* circuit makes its first console appearance in *Ridge Racers*, along with at least one other remake of a previously arcade-only course



Building a new world

While *EverQuest* gave many things to the MMO genre, crafting wasn't one of them. SOE has taken a good look at what its competitors offer in this department and decided that rather than make the act of building in-game items an exercise in automation and macro creation, budding artisans should be able to get as much out of the game as the warriors and spell casters. Thus, crafting in *EQII* is practically a game in its own right. Aside from gathering any required resources, the process of creation is privy to as many skills and special actions as casting fireballs at dragons, offering its own experience accumulation and class progression.

Rat killing is still ever-present, but the experience is now far less of a grind. Plus, they are very nice looking rats these days...

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E137**







Combat is more of an involving affair than it is in most MMOs, with players feeling far more like powerful warriors and wizards from the very start – this is a deliberate effort by SOE to attract a new audience



Characters now have a wide range of emotions, and the professional voiceovers used for NPCs bring much-needed life to what could have been a dry world

EverQuest II

The original provided the template for others to follow. Now the sequel itself has that legacy to compete with

Four days following the impressively smooth and problem-free launch of *EverQuest II*, Sony Online Entertainment had to open a dozen new servers to cope with demand. It's a dramatic step – suggesting either a canny attempt to generate some media buzz, or an embarrassing underestimation of just how popular the sequel to the MMO genre's bench-setter was likely to be. Given the expertise SOE has in running and marketing virtual worlds – from the original *EverQuest* to licensed fare such as *Star Wars Galaxies* – it seems safe to assume the former, and as such, it's been badly needed. Only the most blinded of developers could have failed to notice how much attention nearest rival *World Of WarCraft* had captured in the months prior to *EQII*'s launch, especially amongst the non-MMO fraternity. Although fundamentally similar, Blizzard has, through clever presentation and the company's famed design experience, made *World Of WarCraft* cool. Despite all attempts to open up the online fantasy experience, *EverQuest II* is still, well, *EverQuest* – and five years of nerd heritage is a difficult perception to shift.

Not that SOE hasn't been trying. In the weeks prior to the end of the beta, Norrathian testers found the game evolving on an almost daily basis. Most notable were the late inclusion of the various differing quest types. MMOs are constantly striving to find ways to eliminate the 'grind' (the repetitive and interest-free labour involved in levelling up characters), usually without success; one of *EQII*'s many solutions is to turn the act on its head and suggest that by repeatedly killing, say, a goblin, you can gain specific expertise against that particular foe, offering bonuses and special skills.

It's a nice touch, and there are many more. You gain bonuses merely for exploring, for running errands, for completing heritage quests designed to further your social standing and, in what is surely a nod to the game's growing Asian audience, even for simply collecting and trading items, from butterflies and shells to bone fragments from your vanquished enemies.

On a larger scale, *EQII* has been designed to simplify your experience, and players are almost never at a loss as to what to do, admirably achieved without the game feeling too linear. Class choices have been reduced to the four standard fantasy archetypes, although there is still a wide range of ways to individualise your avatar, both visually and through specific skill enhancement.

Visually, *EQII* renders obsolete others' excuses about bandwidth limitations as a justification for lacklustre graphics. SOE has even taken the step of future-proofing the game: select the top visual settings and you are warned that even today's highest-end machines probably aren't capable of running the game.

It's all been designed to win over those who have always dismissed online gaming as a kind of poor relation to 'proper' gaming. If the numbers already flocking to SOE's ever-growing list of servers are any indication, it's mission accomplished.



Visual effects have undergone extensive makeovers, mo[st] notably in particle systems used to portray magic spells. Of course, everything can be adjusted downwards shoul[d] you not be packing a graphics card the size of a shed

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JANUARY (US), 2005 (UK)**

Suikoden IV

Set 150 years before the original Suikoden, the design doc here may date from the same era

There's no doubt *Suikoden IV* is going to be as deep and wide as the ocean it's set on. And there's no doubt that it stays true to a tradition which is well loved, particularly in its native Japan. And to an extent, that's all there is to say.

For some, those two factors alone will put the game beyond criticism. Laying into the game's viciously dated visuals marks you out as a graphics freak, prizing style over substance. Complaining about the random battles, which early in the game face you off against the same two enemy types over and over and over, demonstrates that you're someone who doesn't 'get' the game's tradition. Expressing incredulity over the clunky dullness of your ship's autopilot reveals your unreasonable expectations of an action game, when *Suikoden* is about strategy and story. But these things matter, and they detract from *Suikoden's* achievements. Graphics can be beautiful as well as simple; random battles can be better and more flexibly calibrated; sailing can be satisfying rather than stultifying.

This isn't laziness – the in-house team has taken bold steps, moving the series on to water and re-balancing fundamental elements of the battle system. Playing it, however, there's a profound sense that they haven't looked up since *Suikoden* debuted in 1995, and therefore haven't really grasped how dramatically the gaming world has changed since.



Team-up attacks have always been part of the *Suikoden* canon, but the versions available early in this game are underwhelming to say the least, as one character hits an enemy and then politely waits for his partner to do the same. Hopefully teams with more wit and verve will appear later in the adventure, but it's one of many early disappointments



Magical attacks are linked to runes, and since you're unable to reallocate them in the field, thinking ahead is important

Conker: Live & Reloaded

Is Rare's squirrel-gone-feral still bad to the funny bone? And can a 'remix' actually cut it nowadays?

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E125, E138**





Conker's health is still represented by a bar of chocolate: take a hit and lose a chunk. Weirdly, Rare seems to have resisted the temptation to crack the thousand or so off-colour jokes which could be made about the process

Maybe it's just coincidence that the *Live & Reloaded* subtitle sounds like the name of some loudmouth comedian's comeback tour, but that's exactly what it feels like. Rare's platforming iconoclast hasn't changed his routine any – this Xbox update of the infamous N64 *Bad Fur Day* lampoons, curses, spurts, pukes, farts and amputates its way through disparate styles of play whose number is only matched by the quantity of knob gags. Movies are still the richest source of its satire, into which it rips so mercilessly that there's little feeling of continuity as the player is shunted from one reference-rich set-piece to the next.

Despite the postponement of *Kameo* and other assorted fumblings, *Conker's* March 2005 release has been cemented somewhat by the release of a playable demo, showcasing the gloriously violent homage to Saving Private Ryan's beach landing sequence. It points to a game that's looking solid and finished, and bristles with graphical quality – literally, when applied to the lush fur of the characters. Bullets zing and crack the screen, explosions cast some beautiful light and shadows, and animals explode into blobs of gore. This may be just a 'reloading' of the original, but the sample stage feels as refreshing, as welcome and – surprisingly – as different is it did the first time. It also feels easier to play, not seeming to club the player with frustrating sticking points .

The Live component is promising to be a substantial part of the package, and looks to be rivalling *Halo 2* in terms of complexity and options. Five vehicles feature, complete with vivid names – Sky Steed, Mule Bomber, R-Hog, Toad Jeep and Tankus. And six character classes – such as Grunt, Skyjockey and Sneaker – will be on offer to take 16 players through the scenarios.



The online campaigns feature cooperative missions, themed around Old War and Future War, and allow players to earn medals and unlockables. Not to mention there being out-and-out deathmatch carnage, naturally

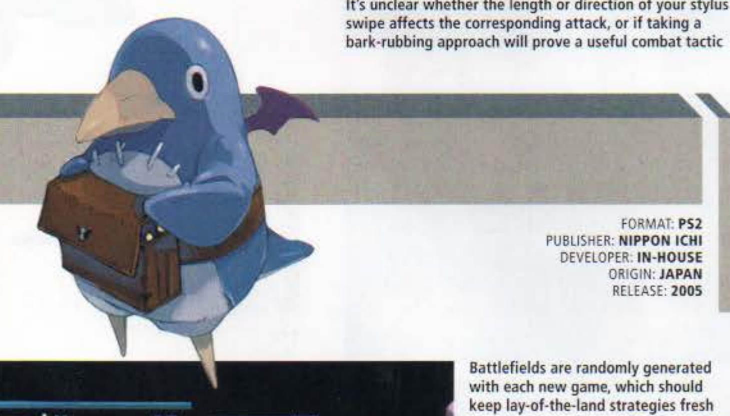


***Conker's* main campaign is, if nothing else, looking to be one of the prettiest titles on Xbox. The beach landing stage features some impressive scale and visual effects as well as booming sound**

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **INTERACTIVE BRAINS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Deep Labyrinth

The DS's action set extends from Feeling The Magic to Fighting The Dragon and Quaffing The Healing Potions



Fighting agile, avian enemies will test *Deep Labyrinth*'s control system, but the orginal is surprisingly responsive, and DS optimisation should further aid matters

Though Masaki Takeda might not have the western recognition of some of his fellow Japanese developers, his resume speaks for itself: having worked at Namco since 1986 programming arcade titles from *Ridge Racer* to *Soul Calibur*, he also led the company's advance into the mobile phone sector, presenting a Java version of *Pac-Man* at Japan's first Java-enabled handset conference. So enamored was Takeda with the possibilities presented by mobile gaming that he left Namco in 2001 to form his own mobile developer, Interactive Brains.



It's unclear whether the length or direction of your stylus swipe affects the corresponding attack, or if taking a bark-rubbing approach will prove a useful combat tactic

The original, mobile version of *Deep Labyrinth* is a realtime 3D dungeon crawl – a genre both Atlus and From Software have proved maintains a strong cult following in the east. Running on the latest Toshiba 3D chip and hailed as the most advanced 3D in a handset game to date, it's also leading Interactive Brains' drive into the DS market, with the touchscreen providing a more gestural reworking of the game's magic system. Using a panel of nine icons, previously corresponding to the handset's keypad, the player can cast spells by drawing runic symbols with the stylus, and melee attacks are also launched by sweeping the stylus across the screen. Management of the already smartly layered menus also benefits from touch control.

Alongside Takeda's programming prowess, *Deep Labyrinth*'s storyline has been penned by Kato Masato (of *Chrono Trigger/Cross*, *FFXI* and *Baten Kaitos* fame), and the soundtrack is composed by Yasunori Mitsuda



The DS's top screen is usually reserved for a map of the surrounding area, but in a theatrical twist boss monsters use the full height of the display to emphasise their looming scale while you slash away at their kneecaps

(also from the *Chrono* series, and *Xenogears/Xenosaga*). While their attachment could find the game a western release, the genre is the most unfashionable classmate of the old school, and Nintendos America and Europe may choose to leave *Deep Labyrinth* buried. In that case, the import crowd who consider From's dungeon crawls to be tense as opposed to turgid will appreciate the DS's region-free nature.

Phantom Kingdom

Welcome back to Nippon Ichi's brand of turf wars – this time with architecture action

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NIPPON ICHI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**



Battlefields are randomly generated with each new game, which should keep lay-of-the-land strategies fresh

The Nippon Ichi strategy-RPG machine marches on with another tale of demon kings and netherworld infighting, this time chronicling the return to power of an overambitious ruler, Zeta, who has lost nearly his entire hellish kingdom through disastrous leadership. Rather than lick his wounds, Zeta intends to retake his empire one battlefield at a time. Professing their support in this endeavour are three demonic rulers, though their allegiances are more than suspect.

Before each battle, the player selects which of the trio will lead the attack. Once chosen, they assemble their troops and weaponry – these, and other beneficial items and effects, are produced by various types of building created by the player. If it's all starting to sound a little traditional build-and-battle, the twist is that a building can be garrisoned with troops and then deployed, loudly, on to the battlefield using the Invite system. It must then be defended against enemy assault to retain its bonuses: similarly, any enemy buildings can be either sacked or captured – the spoils of the latter being any items or weapons developed inside it.

Once a battle is won, the area must be rebuilt with new structures to press the war effort forward: the level of the demon noble being called on for construction determines the type and power of buildings available. With the exception of sending your factories and churches out to fight (and of course that age-old broadswords or rocket launchers conundrum), it seems deceptively straightforward for Nippon Ichi, but it's likely *Phantom Kingdom*'s buildings have labyrinthine depths.



Zeta's political and personal manoeuvrings are narrated with typical flair, and suggest Nippon Ichi could produce a mean 2D fighter should its strategy muse ever dry up





Radical is promising a high level of interactivity, letting cars and rubble be thrown like lethal beach balls

The local police gate-crashing a rumble with an arch-enemy is an occupational hazard. It adds an interesting strategic element to the big dumb fun that Hulk offers – get too carried away and the game will automatically become harder



The New Hulk Game (working title)

Though it doesn't follow a movie plot this time out, the new Banner brawler offers action by the (smashed-up) busload

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

The first Hulk game was, in many respects, the perfect licence, in that it perfectly mirrored how most people felt about the TV show: likeable enough, though a bit clunky by modern standards, Hulk looked like fun, but Banner seemed pretty wet. More interesting is that this response seems to perfectly mirror how Radical itself now feels about its own game. Acutely aware of how much more fun people had smashing than sneaking, the developer has set out to deliver all the ferocious power that the Hulk exhibits in his comics.

The result is something which seems remarkably familiar to the solution the *Spider-Man 2* team found (although the Hulk has been in development since before Spidey's second outing). Free roaming around an enormous city, the Hulk no longer lumbers. The city's skyscrapers are a toybox for him – hurdles to be leaped, punched and, yes, smashed. A jump or two will take you to the rooftops and you can snap off spires to use as clubs or javelins.

Set into this free-roam mode are missions which require the Hulk to face off against ludicrously powerful enemies, beefed-up to match his new powers. However, get too gung-ho and the city will try to defend itself, summoning police and soldiers to try to take you out. It's an interesting dynamic, acting as an adaptive difficulty curve, but also as a source of unlikely ammunition. Find a jeep-mounted rocket launcher and you can rip the ammo out of the barrel, tucking the spares under your left arm while you launch them with your right.



Most surprising to Hulk ingenues may be his jumping abilities. Soaring skyward, he can land on rooftops with a jarring crunch before racing back down to ground level

The developers are irrepressibly enthusiastic about 'the destroying everything', but these are promises that have been made before. A more protracted playtest will be needed before it becomes clear what the promise means in practice. Also unproven is the mission-plus-free-roam format. One of the curses of *GTA* is how easy it makes it look – there's hardly a copycat yet that hasn't fallen down trying to use its template. However, early signs are good. The Hulk is as fast as he is furious, Banner is thankfully absent and the developers show every sign of learning from past mistakes and current successes.



Just how destructable the destructable environments prove to be remains to be seen. The code we've seen displayed an impressive amount of rubble and craters







The angrier Hulk gets, the stronger he becomes, although fans of the series still debate if there is any actual limit to his strength. Lifting tanks, at least, seems to present him with no problem whatsoever



Dream Weavers

Mixing ethereal fantasy and earthy humanity, old-school adventure and new-world action, Funcom is embarking on a whole new journey



And this," says (*Dreamfall*'s game director) **Ragnar Tørnquist**, proudly, "is our ex-boyfriend's apartment." It takes a moment for the giggles to spread around the room, but when they do they infect Tørnquist as surely as everyone else. "Well, not OUR ex-boyfriend," he clarifies, ruefully. "I get a little too attached sometimes. Anyway. This is your ex-boyfriend's apartment." More giggles. We deny having ever even met the man, let alone embarked on a doomed affair. "Fine. This is ZOË's ex-boyfriend's apartment." He raises an eyebrow, and the laughter subsides.

This isn't an exercise in poking fun at a roomful of Norwegians having to do a presentation in their second language – not least because everyone's English here is shockingly flawless. Instead, it's the perfect illustration of something which is at the heart of the game they're making: the question of identity. *Dreamfall* is the sequel to *The Longest Journey* (PC, 1999), a lavish but traditional adventure which famously introduced us to April Ryan, a character with more capricious humanity than games had mustered before or since.

Dreamfall, however, isn't a lazy follow-up; there are stark contrasts between the two games. *TLJ* was a deeply conventional point 'n' click adventure, criticised as passionately for its obscure puzzles and extended conversation trees as it was praised for its sumptuous art direction and intelligent, articulate cast. *Dreamfall* is a thirdperson action adventure, carefully tailored for the Xbox pad as well as the PC mouse. It has fighting in it. It means that *Dreamfall* has to pitch itself very carefully. Why should loyal *TLJ* fans want to play something so radically different? And, more importantly, since there are so many more of them, why should the people who were alienated by *TLJ*'s puzzles want to play *Dreamfall*?

At the mention of *TLJ*'s puzzles, the team pull faces. There's a rumble of muttering in which the only distinct phrase is "that damn rubber duck" – a reference to the famously obtuse moment which saw you inflating a punctured rubber ring to apply variable pressure to the handles of a clamp which you'd rescued from a complicated plumbing contraption in order to salvage a key which had conveniently fallen on to some electrified subway tracks. "Puzzle," says Tørnquist carefully, "is a word I don't necessarily enjoy that much. Puzzles to me imply something which is, well, *puzzling*. Our philosophy is very simple. It has to feel relevant and realistic – it should never feel like an

TITLE: **DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY**
FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **FUNCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **NORWAY**
RELEASE DATE: **AUTUMN 2005**

arbitrary challenge just to stop your progress through the game. But *challenges*" – he stresses the word sternly – "are important to make you feel empowered – it's a key element in the game."

There's no denying the loyalty that traditional adventure game fans feel for their genre. The question that faced the *Dreamfall* team was if the group of people who'd enjoyed the puzzles in *TLJ* was big enough to sustain full-scale game development. For Tørnquist the answer is simple: "No, it's not, and that's the challenge for us doing *Dreamfall*. We're not going to make games that nobody wants to play. We're not in this for the sake of art, we're in it because it's a craft we enjoy and because we like to entertain people."

"We're like every other company – we have to make money," Tørnquist continues. "We want to appeal to a lot of people, and puzzles don't let you do that. There's only a narrow section of people left who still enjoy *Myst*. I've *never* enjoyed that. I'm not smart enough to get past strange sliding-type things. So we want to simplify without stupidifying. *Dreamfall* won't be as difficult as *TLJ*, but I don't see that as a bad thing. I don't think most people finish the games they buy. They get maybe halfway through and then they give up – it's true for a lot of us around this table. We don't see the point in creating a game where people get stuck halfway through. We're not making a game where the hi-score is important, we're making a game where the journey is important."

Does that mean he's abandoned the game's core audience in the interests of courting the wider market? Tørnquist considers: "I don't think people played *TLJ* because of the gameplay. Some people liked it in spite of the gameplay and some people liked the whole package – but no one liked it just for the mechanics. So this time around we're not taking away what people loved about the game, but we're going to add what other games offer nowadays – the pacing, the freedom."

He appears unrepentant about the decision: "We always like to do something we haven't done before. And we've done the adventure game, and we don't want to go back to that again. There were some people on the team who thought, 'Oh my god, should we do this, are we going to screw it up, are we going to ruin the feel of it?', but once we really described what we were going to do in detail they felt a lot better. This a true action adventure. Most action adventures are really platform games or action games. This game is a story, and that story is a thriller and so it needs action. If you're going to tell a story that has higher stakes, it's going to have consequences that lead to more dangerous situations and that means you're going to need a system which has direct control. You can do that without including combat, but that doesn't feel right either. Why shouldn't you be able to defend yourself?"

This argument makes *Dreamfall* snap into focus. This isn't an adventure game mindlessly updated to mirror current gaming convention. This is a team with a specific story to tell, determined to wrangle the best of gaming's techniques into telling it in the best way they can imagine. Once you've accepted that this is a thriller, a story punctuated with danger, violence and desperate improvisation, it becomes obvious why the format has changed. And at that point, the interesting thing about *Dreamfall* shifts from being the 'Can adventure games survive?' chestnut to 'Just what is this story they're trying to tell?'

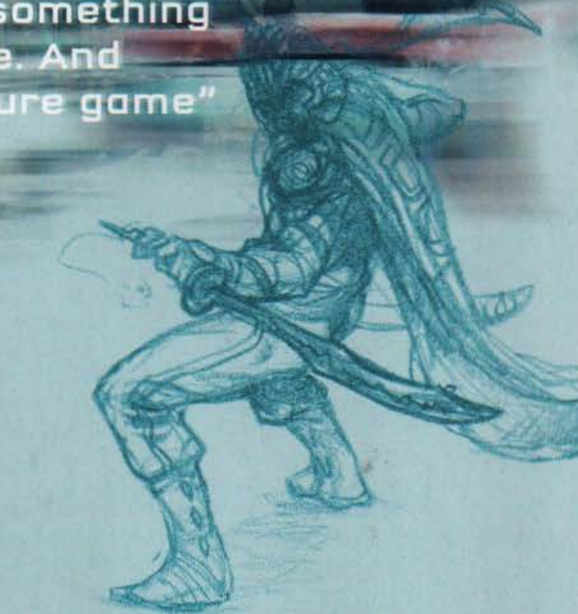






Players of *The Longest Journey* will recognise a number of locations for April's earlier adventures. Some have changed dramatically; others, less so

"We always like to do something we haven't done before. And we've done the adventure game"





Set-pieces, like this rescue sequence, can't be failed. Although the game works hard to induce a sense of desperate panic, it allows you time to look around and plan your actions. In combat, death will reset your game to a recent checkpoint


Ragnar Tørnquist


Despite her fantasy environment, Zoë is facing a fairly mundane conundrum, having recently split from her boyfriend and moved back to live with her father. It's not average videogame backstory

First impressions are the very opposite of thrilling. The game opens (after a top-secret prelude set in what Tørnquist calls "a very mysterious place") in the sunny tranquillity of New Casablanca, 200 years in the future. This isn't strictly speaking our world – like *TLJ*, *Dreamfall* starts out on Stark, a recognisable but distinctive alternate Earth – but it feels like how you wish our world was. In the 23rd century, Africa has emerged as a new world power. It has become a technology producer, and is wealthy compared to a Europe that has shaken itself to pieces. Tørnquist clearly relishes the chance to engage in a little sociopolitical engineering. "It's nice to do a bit of empowerment in a game," he grins. Zoë, one of the game's three central characters, wakes up in her palatial bedroom – all stone floors, luxurious cushions and endless sunshine. As is Tørnquist tradition she's young, beautiful and a little dispossessed. As is also Tørnquist tradition, she's ("very tastefully," he stresses) wearing only her underwear.

Once dressed, and with her character neatly established by the unpacked boxes of her possessions stacked in the corner, it's already clear that Zoë is a character as irresistibly human as April ever was. She dashes out into the piercing sunlight like a girl late for gym class, not like a videogame hero late for a cut-scene. The trigger which converts this idyll into a tense thriller is a seemingly innocuous favour – picking up a package for that troublesome ex-boyfriend. This takes Zoë to JIVA, a biotechnology company, and her encounter with a nervy, rude receptionist begins to map out how a 'true' action-adventure actually plays.

Fobbed off by the jittery woman, you (and Zoë) start to become suspicious. Suddenly, the screen that dominates the foyer blooms into life, showing a terrified woman, screaming silently and desperately into a CCTV lens. It's a bizarre, shocking moment. The receptionist remains oblivious to the screen behind her; you struggle to make sense of the distressing image. Whatever is happening is clearly happening now, and it's clearly happening here. And now you face your first choice. If you're a careful player, you've taken the chance to scope out the room and spotted a nearby storage cupboard. A little resourceful wheedling cons the receptionist into checking in the cupboard for your package, giving you the chance to lock her inside and set off in search of the screaming woman. Less careful players? "You're going to have to fight this woman and take her out," says Tørnquist. There's a pause. What? It's hard to explain how unusual this proposition is. In a few short

THE LONGER JOURNEY

Dreamfall's predecessor, *The Longest Journey* (below), is worth revisiting not least because it demonstrates so dramatically how far games have moved forward in the last five years – and how far they still have to go.

It's an infuriating title in many respects. Many who enjoyed the puzzles found the game's lengthy conversations a passive and frustrating chore. Those who revelled in the unusually high quality of scripting, characterisation and voice acting were often infuriated by trekking back and forth to combine item X with item Y. What united everyone who played it was a passionate enthusiasm for the art direction, the potential of which was only hinted at by the technology of the time. Similarly unifying was an affection for April, as most players found it largely impossible to remain impassive towards her as they uncovered the shards of her distressing earlier life. Five years on, there are only a handful of games to have matched it.

In other areas, however, player expectations have soared. Innovations in AI and emergent play have revolutionised how we interact with the worlds we visit. Improvements in control systems and camera design have changed how we expect to move. As a result, *TLJ* has dated badly. Less sophisticated point-and-clicks stand the test of time better – courtesy of nostalgia-tinted spectacles. *TLJ* is too modern in its ambitions and too traditional in its mechanisms to survive as a true classic.



minutes, New Casablanca has lulled us into such a sense of normality that the thought of walking into an office and clocking out the receptionist is profoundly absurd, screaming woman or no.

Tørnquist is implacably confident that the world he has created is coherent enough to withstand the extremity of the moment: "Zoë's not going to walk into a place and go gung-ho and Rambo. That's just not going to happen. She's driven into this fight in self defence, and it's something she's torn about afterwards. Also, she just can't take a lot of punches. She's not buff – and nor is she Buffy. She knows a few moves from her self-defence class, but she doesn't stand a chance against someone who's bigger than her or properly trained." As a result, the player can engineer it so that Zoë never has to fight. "She's a talker," it's explained, someone who gets out of situations by being smart. This consistency is also applied to the game's other characters.

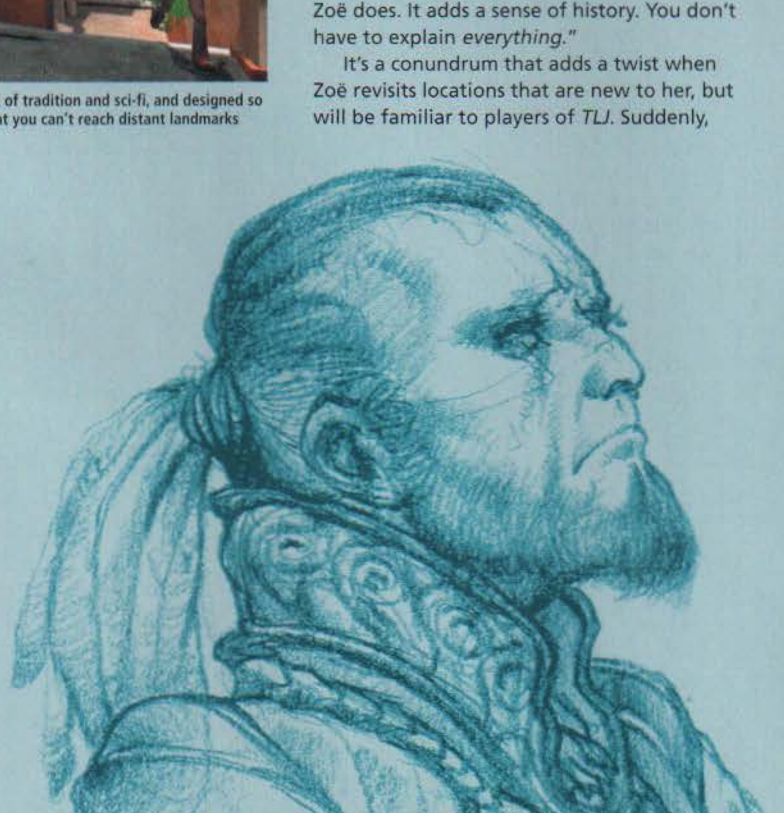


New Casablanca is a mix of tradition and sci-fi, and designed so that you don't notice that you can't reach distant landmarks

April, back from the first game, had a tough childhood that has prepared her for a tougher adventure: "She's someone who's had to fend for herself on the streets, so she's had to learn how to take care of herself." Kian, another new character, is a mysterious assassin, and as a result has the skills that mean he doesn't need to shy away from a fight.

This coherence between each character's past and the future you map out for them in the game is what lies at the heart of *Dreamfall*'s strength. This is a game of real roleplay, one where you step into the shoes of a fully formed person, and this, confusingly, means to Tørnquist that "*Dreamfall* isn't an RPG. You're not creating a character. This isn't Zoë's birth. She's been around for 20 years." It's an issue that produces a fundamental problem for adventure game scriptwriters. "The player is put in the shoes of someone who knows the world well, and that's always a challenge. It's something we're really struggling to get right, so that the conversations sound natural and we don't turn one of the characters into Mr Exposition," says Tørnquist. "Especially when it comes to characters like Zoë's dad and her ex, people you have very little 'face time' with. It means we're not afraid to mention things that the player doesn't know but that Zoë does. It adds a sense of history. You don't have to explain *everything*."

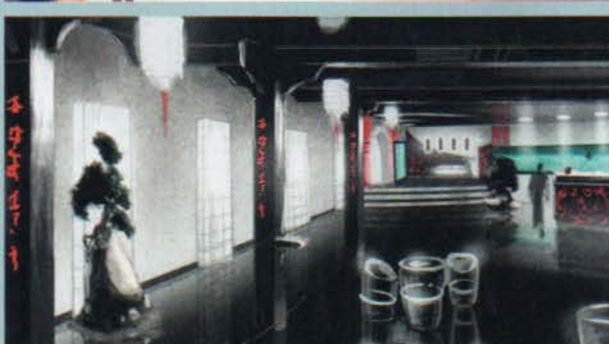
It's a conundrum that adds a twist when Zoë revisits locations that are new to her, but will be familiar to players of *TLJ*. Suddenly, she doesn't know where she is, but the player knows every inch of the familiar ground. Except it's not quite how you remember it. "Here we are at Border House," says Tørnquist, in tour-guide mode, gesturing to a bleak scene. "And here's the bench. Now broken. Really, everything you know has been broken. We do subscribe to that idea that you build things up and then you break them down. Everything was lovely in the first game and everything is horrible





All the in-game images shown are early shots from *Dreamfall*'s second iteration. As work continues into 2005, the character models, animations and environments will all be overhauled













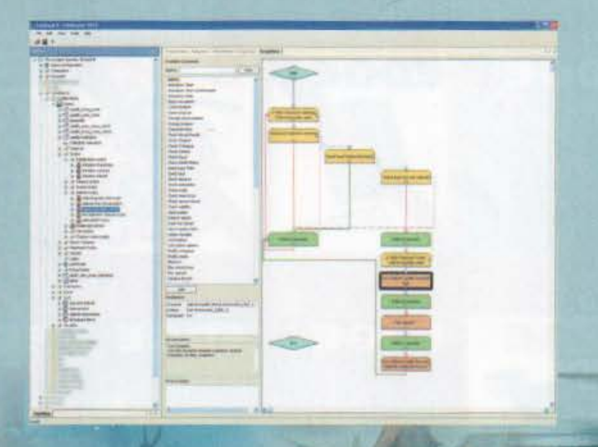

Although her essential character design never changed, Zoë went through a number of subtle refinements before the team settled on her final, elegant look

now. This is our Empire Strikes Back. This is where things go to hell."

Things are going to hell because *Dreamfall* has that most rare of videogame features: a theme. "When we decided to make a sequel we knew the broad strokes of the world, and we knew how it was going to change. But when we created the characters we tried to think about what we wanted to say with this game, because I think it's very important that a game should say something," explains Tørnquist. "So we sat down and tried to figure out what our story was about and realised it was about faith. Having faith, losing faith and acquiring faith. You find your theme and you end up building a lot of things around it." What *Dreamfall*'s team has ended up building is a terrifying structure that spirals into despair and madness. Loss of faith leads to disillusionment and hopelessness, and those who can't find a way to transform and regain faith sink down into spiritual death or obsession. Every character, major or minor, cycles through this journey. Every location's mood is plotted on this graph. The team are evangelical about the coherence and rigour it brings to game design, but well aware of how pretentious it might sound.

"We're not going to have it on the back of the box – a thing headed 'Themes' and then bullet points: Faith, Loss Of Faith, Hopelessness," spoofs Tørnquist. "And we don't have signs up all around saying REMEMBER FAITH. But I think that people – even the ones who are hostile to the idea of games being taken too seriously – enjoy the dimension that this kind of thinking can bring. I don't think we're doing anything exceptionally brilliant – we're just recognising the fact that there's always going to be a subtext no matter what you do. To be conscious of it allows you to use it better."

It's a remarkable viewpoint. Most conversations about depth in videogaming begin with the question of whether or not subtext is even possible in games. Tørnquist starts with the conviction that it's unavoidable. Although he grew up a gamer, his training is in filmmaking, and he brings from that medium some assumptions gaming would do well do adopt. He expects the people he creates to look like people and sound like people – *TLJ*, despite its sedate pace of play and lack of combat, was 18-rated. People swore and made seedy passes at each other. There were gay characters and black characters, realised well beyond any accusations of tokenism. There were people who took the rise if you



"Games are about characters, and having a sense of dialogue is very important. To me, that's gameplay"

approached and said to them 'Can I ask you some questions?' nine times in a row. But Tørnquist is quick to deflect the easy comparisons: "I don't see games as films at all. I want to get rid of cinematic sequences. I want to have control all the time. But games are about characters, and having a sense of dialogue is very important. Because to me, that's gameplay. Just walking up to a living creature, in a world which feels real, who has a job and a life and a voice."

It's too early in *Dreamfall*'s life to form any judgement of how well its ingredients will combine. The locations, both those finished and those still carved from textureless slabs of virtual clay, make you itch to explore. The characters are already so engaging that you don't want to be them, you want to be *with* them. *TLJ* has very effectively benchmarked the team's ability to create vibrant, convincing dialogue. But, while there's no doubting the clarity of thought that has gone into the game's challenges, or the validity of the intention behind the inclusion of combat, it's too soon to be sure. It won't be until all the elements are stitched together that the game will be able to prove if it has met its real challenge: to sustain the convincing portrayal of the complex human potential once it's placed its characters in the inevitably limited scenarios of a linear videogame.

It's a huge task, and makes you realise Tørnquist wasn't kidding: *Dreamfall* is all about faith. From what we've seen so far, however, the team is set to defy its own gloomy cycle.

THE CHILLOUT ZONE

Dreamfall is being produced using an updated version of *TLJ*'s toolset. Named LAIDBACK (Level And Item Database BAck-end Code Kicker), it lives up to its name, protecting team members from nasty crunches by allowing them to work across the whole project organically, with artists able to drop in new enviroments and animations as they become available, and designers able to test gameplay ideas and tweak camera tracks in minutes. Particularly crucial for a game like *Dreamfall* is the simple, colour-coded system for managing the game's vast dialogue trees. It's approachable but powerful, and would in theory enable the artists and designers to produce an entirely new game without any input from programmers, although Tørnquist is quick to point out that the team always have too many new ideas for that to be a viable proposition.




Although the game is set 200 years in the future, the team has worked hard to ensure the technology available is plausible and coherent. "We ask ourselves 'why?' a lot," says Tørnquist. "Why does that work like that? Why does that happen like that? We don't just put things in because we think they would look cool"



WHEN SEGA TAKES AGES

Most driving game sequels don't take six years. But then most driving game sequels aren't the latest in the Sega Rally series...

After a strangely long absence, *Sega Rally Championship* is preparing to re-enter the race – and not in the arcade, but on PlayStation2. We talked to producer **Jun Taniguchi** and director **Kenji Sasaki** about their new direction for a treasured franchise.

***Sega Rally* has traditionally led as an arcade title. What made you decide to develop this version on PS2?**

JT: The requests from gamers were quite important. Of course we had many requests for an arcade version as well and, yes, we like to challenge ourselves on powerful platforms. Arcade, PC or Xbox could have suited us in that matter, but PS2 is the biggest market of all. It is the tenth anniversary of the series. Until now, we had enjoyed sharing our passion of automobiles with a broad public: first in the arcade when that market was at its peak, then on Saturn with 1.2 million copies worldwide and later on Dreamcast with around a million copies worldwide. As you know, though, [coin-op] sales are down. With this anniversary in mind we wanted to make a game so fans and newcomers alike could enjoy our game. The best way to reach so many people was PS2.

KS: The base of the series is our love for automobiles: the fun in driving a car is the core element of the game. Of course, the gap in terms of technology between arcade and the console is quite important, but the main difference is you can't enjoy an arcade game as you would enjoy a consumer game. You have to deliver all the fun in three minutes for the arcade while, on console, you expect to be able to play the game for as long as you want, whenever you want. So if our main motivation is the same, we have to redesign the game rules and play time to fit with this new market.



How has that affected the play modes on offer?

KS: Two of them are very similar to what you had in the arcade. The Quick Race mode is what we used to call the Championship mode. Then you have Time Attack. The third mode is really specific to the consumer market, the Career Mode. It follows an automobile enthusiast who decides to drive competitively, first locally and later aiming at higher classes until finally entering the Sega Rally Championship. He then has a year of competition to reach the top of that championship.

"The game will give the player freedom to do what he wants. To become the champion, you will aim at the Championship and play hard. Or you may prefer to be just a local champion"

I know this style of play is quite common nowadays, but usually you need to clear a race in order to access the next one. And eventually you come to a race that's too difficult, and you can't progress beyond that stage, which is where most players give up. We want to avoid these problems with our vision of the career mode in *Sega Rally 2005*. All our events and training session are scheduled on a calendar, and you are free to attend or ignore them as you wish – although some may have conditions for attendance, such as achieving great results in a previous race or holding a certain licence.

But presumably there'll still be a need to clear a series of events to access the final championship.

KS: Well, the game will give the player the freedom to do what he wants. If he wants to become the overall champion, he will aim at the *Sega Rally* Championship and play hard. Others might only enjoy one kind of race, like the Toge [illegal mountain races]. You may prefer to be just a local champion. The Career mode is divided into classes like you would find in WRC, but we did not put a limitation on the car choice as you would find in other games. Of course, you will definitely need to gain access to a higher class in order to buy a more powerful car, but you can get a powerful car from the beginning if you can afford it, just like in reality. For example, you could buy an Impreza or a Lancer Evo as your first car. You can go to your car dealer, buy them and then attend a local rally competition. In the game you can do the same.





Top: *SR2005* director Kenji Sasaki, co-designer of the original *Sega Rally Championship* with Tetsuya Mizuguchi when both worked at AM3. Above: *SR2005* producer Jun Taniguchi, previously producer on *Sega Rally 2*

How many cars will be featured?

KS: There are not that many, around 20. One problem was that there are not many cars in the WRC championship.

JT: But you know, in Europe, you have lower classes like the Junior WRC and the Super 1600. In these classes you find competitive cars like the Astra, the Golf, etc, but rally fans are focused on the higher classes with cars like the Impreza and the 307. So packing the game with hundreds of cars is not always the solution, and I'm not convinced that players play all these cars. Plus, hundreds of cars mean you need to prepare the equal number of physics – so we preferred to focus on a smaller number of cars but making them individually really enjoyable.

Career mode successes attract the attention of sponsors, allowing you to earn an income from continued racing form





What about the cars at the heart of the series – the Toyota Celica, the Lancia Delta and the Stratos?

KS: They appeared in the demo, but we're not yet completely sure if we will use them in the final game. I can say you shouldn't expect old but legendary cars like the 205 or the Alpine, though. This 2005 version is a way for us to reset the series and make a fresh start on console.

Will there be any focus on tuning your cars, or are you concentrating on the racing aspect?

KS: Since I want to bring game back to racing, I would prefer to avoid having players spend too much time on this. So this option is purposefully not that deep in the game.

You've announced the game will feature a random course generator – is this as an aside from the prebuilt courses for the main game modes?

KS: Yes, we developed the random course program as an idea to help make players enjoy our game. But our problem at the moment is to determine whether the courses it creates are fun.

There are also plenty of courses. We are planning something like 400 tracks of various types for the Career mode – although that does not mean you will find 400 different landscapes. We will also have various weather conditions prepared, and we are still working on effects in order to study what we can do in addition to the 'classic' conditions.

How about the other racers? Are you working on giving them personality through AI?

JT: Career mode will feature AI rivals who will have their own names and their own specialities. So according to your driving style you may always find yourself confronting a given rival. And they each have a kind of 'psychological profile', a way that they drive. Previously, you only had types of car as rivals,

The TGS2004 build is an early version, with effects and general polish to be implemented – which should remedy these screens' eerie similarity to speed camera shots



Classic *Sega Rally* series courses will reappear, as well as donating their environments for use in random courses



The screenshots may suggest otherwise, but Taniguchi assures us the game cannot be completed by sticking to a single type of car, with higher classes requiring higher-performance vehicles to remain competitive

"Games are getting too difficult to enjoy. Most racing games claim they are realistic, but I think realism has several faces and one is the way you enjoy the game"

Though the details have not been finalised, the player will be able to store a number of cars in their garage to remain prepared for multiple race types and conditions

but now you have Mr X on Evo, or Mr Y on another Evo, Mr Z on Impreza, etc…

KS: You will find one AI known for high speed, another for aggression, and so on.

JT: This Career mode is a start for us and I see in the future something much more developed, deeper – maybe some kind of a simulation or team management mode.

Simulation-style rally games have proven popular in the console market – are you making any concession to that within this version in the series, or keeping to *Sega Rally*'s arcade heritage?

KS: We want to deliver a gaming experience and, in that regard, it will be arcade. So, yes, it would be closer to a game like *RalliSport Challenge* on Xbox. I know they did that game because they loved our *Sega Rally*, which I find really cool. And we enjoy playin *RalliSport* in our office sometimes!

Overall, I think games are getting too difficult to enjoy and very inaccessible for many. I still believe that we can enjoy games purely for fun. Most of the racing games on consoles claim they are realistic, but I think realism has several faces and one of them is the way you enjoy the game.



That sounds similar to the approach you've always taken with the series.
KS: When we did the first *Sega Rally*, we had many competitors on the market: *Daytona*, *Ridge Racer*, etc. When we decided to make *Sega Rally*, we agreed to change the way players should enjoy a racing game. We first wanted the player to feel as if he was actually driving a real car. In other racing games, you would have a high sense of speed. In *Sega Rally*, we decreased this speed and focused everything on controls. We amplified the controls to make them very easy to understand. So our cars in *Sega Rally* were drifting in a way a real WRC car would not. At that time, we did not spend any time in testing real WRC cars, but the result was that users were delighted and found our game very 'realistic'.

With *Sega Rally 2*, it was a time when simulators were numerous, like *Gran Turismo*. So this time, we went testing rally cars with real drivers. We realised how much our game was different from the reality. Then I felt the need to give the opportunity to the players to experience a rally race through the driver's eyes. That became the base for *Sega Rally 2*. We analysed the cars' specifications to reproduce some of the physics, but our main concern was to recreate the way the driver would see a landscape or the road and the way the controls would work.

You talked about making a fresh start – do you think the arcade series is over?
KS: Hmm... What I can say is you may expect something different from us in the arcade. I mean, seven years have passed since the last *Sega Rally* in the arcade.





Sega Rosso's PS2 experience with the *Initial-D* port, *Special Stage*, provides a solid base for *SR2005*



When did you start working on *Sega Rally 2005*?
KS: My feelings about *Sega Rally* did not disappear during the seven years that I was not working on it. We really started on this version last year, in April or June. But the beginning of the development was quite slow, with few staff working on it. Of course the libraries and our track-building program were in progress for quite some time so it helped speed things up. Currently, there are around 15 of us working on the game. I know you will find much bigger teams working on a single title these days and, yes, I would like to do the same – but right now, I think we are doing OK.

How have you found working with Sony's hardware, given how little experience you've had with it?
KS: I think we're starting to see something quite interesting indeed with how the game is developing. In fact, the designers working on the game are coming from our past structure, Sega Rosso. Now, for this game, since the difficulties of working with the PS2 have been no secret for most of the industry, we have benefited from the past experience of others to build this engine. It will deliver 60fps and we will work to ensure this is constant throughout the game.

Will you be looking to support PS2's online options?
JT: No. The game will be a standalone experience with no twoplayer option.

KS: A player who wants to speed through everything should clear it in 20 to 30 hours. This experience is our objective right now.



The PS2 version remains *Sega Rally 2005*'s primary focus, but Sasaki does not discount the possibilty of the game appearing on other platforms in the future

IRRATIONAL







DISCOURSE



TALKING EMERGENCE, ICONOGRAPHIC IMAGES AND 'GUYS IN TIGHTS' WITH THE TEAM BEHIND FREEDOM FORCE

Irrational Games' story could have been a brief one. In 1997, its three founders seceded from Looking Glass to start a company in **Ken Levine**'s living room – Levine himself having come off a two-year stint developing the story concepts and game designs that would eventually become *Thief* – and picked up their first job creating a singleplayer component for Multitude's isometric shooter, *FireTeam*. As they worked, *FireTeam*'s deathmatch was shown at E3 to considerable acclaim, leading Multitude's board of directors to decide that the game's focus should be entirely multiplayer. "So three weeks in, we got canned," Levine recalls. "I'm living in my apartment in Cambridge [Mass] without a dime to my name, we didn't have any start-up money, and we thought we

were screwed. The next week the phone rings and it's Paul Neurath from Looking Glass, asking if we wanted to do something with [*Thief*'s] Dark Engine."

So, seven years later, Irrational's story is still being written: it's moved out of Levine's living room and into a converted South Boston schoolhouse, where the pictures on the walls of What We Did This Week are the likes of *System Shock 2* and *Freedom Force*. One class project is the upcoming *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich*; another the fourth *SWAT* title ("I wasn't sure about it at first," admits associate producer **Bill Gardner**, "but it turns out we had a lot of closet tactical shooter fans and gun nuts here. And now we play the multiplayer every night"). A clock on the wall is keeping alien time, ticking down to when Irrational's Australian sister studio, the creators of *Tribes: Vengeance*, will arrive in their offices to share the work on *FFv3R* – the Boston crowd has learned to appreciate daylight saving time, as it provides one moment a day where the two studios' normal working hours coincide. It is, in every sense, Irrational with a capital I. As Levine explains it, it's been this way since that Dark Engine game in 1997.

"We came up with the design for an RPG hybrid – it was originally called *Shock* – with the idea that it would be a spiritual successor to *System Shock*," says Levine. "The three of us and an artist that we contracted in built the prototype in two months, working crazy hours – we showed it to publishers, and EA ended up signing it. And as they part-owned the rights to the *System Shock* name, System *Shock 2* was born." As fast as the turnaround for that prototype was, the game's development was similarly impressive: "We did the entire game with a staff of Irrational guys, all of whom work here now, and a few Looking Glass people in about a year. We had no time to polish and balance, but the fact that it came out at all... There was somebody looking out for us on that game."

Shock 2's release would have two major effects on Irrational: for many traumatised PC gamers the developer would become forever synonymous with that title ("Frankly, there are worse things to be typecast as," Levine reasons), but more immediately it would find the company in another less-than-ideal situation. "When we finished *Shock 2*, both my business partners said: 'This was great, we're exhausted, see you later.' And I was running the company by myself with no staff." He grins



Ken Levine's industry stretches from working alongside Doug Church at Looking Glass – "It was like going to college and studying with Einstein" – to running a truly irrepressible studio







Irrational's Vengeance engine, custom rebuilt from an Unreal base for its namesake title (left), also powers *SWAT 4* (top) and future project *BioShock* (above). "The engine is a shared codebase – *Vengeance* and *SWAT* just branch off at a certain point, which is the great thing about working on multiple titles," Levine explains

and cracks a celery stick. (Levine is on a low-carb diet, and we can't help but wonder if Irrational's history has driven up his blood pressure.) "It was a very strange time. Although I ended up meeting up with Crave and making a deal for *The Lost*, and a second opportunity came up to do the superhero game I'd always wanted to do."

At the time, *Freedom Force* seemed a surprising departure from the grey-washed Irrational worldview, though with the developer's repertoire now including a *Tribes* space opera and a realworld squad-based shooter, it's obvious the ability to change style is more representative of Irrational's talent than sticking to one. *Freedom Force*'s black-and-white, or rather primary colour-and-opposing-primary-colour, universe supports a fundamental ideal: "I wanted to ensure that when people picked up the box, they knew it was a game about heroes, to think 'guys in tights'," says Levine. "They're modern myths, and it's not just a particular story, it's the storytelling mechanism. I've written complicated games with complicated motivations, and it's so much easier when characters can say exactly what they're thinking and doing. And the visual opportunities, too – superheroes are iconographic in their colours, and I thought that would translate well to a relatively low-resolution game. Look at Lara Croft back in '95: she was four blocks of primary colour and she had an identifiable shape, and that's what made her striking."

While Irrational's Boston contingent repopulated and committed to their first PS2-native title, *The Lost* (see 'The Lost's cause'), Levine had remained in contact with co-founder Jon Chey, who had since returned to his native Australia. "Jon said he'd like to get back into development if he could do it from there, so I told him I'd see what we could do," Levine says. Once funding for *Freedom Force* was secured, development of the game was shared between Boston and Chey's new Canberra studio, established in the spring of 2000. "And less than two years later, from what started with a guy in his living room, we had the game shipped."



THE LOST'S CAUSE

Inarguably the best unreleased PS2 survival horror/RPG retelling of Dante's Inferno, *The Lost* gave the tale the full Irrational treatment: after the untimely death of her daughter Beatrice, young nurse Amanda strikes a devil's bargain to retrieve her child from the ninth circle of Hell. Though under-prepared for the hazards of Philistia's ransacked libraries, the fetid subways of Dis and mud-choked battlefields of Tiwesdaeg, Amanda can channel warrior Instinct, thief Shadow, mage Corruption or healer Light during her descent, each with their own powers to build and stats to tweak. But Hell, it seemed, had a special place for game developers and their expectant fans: after an impressive LithTech-driven showing at E3 2001, *The Lost* vanished, reappearing in 2002 with an Unreal engine makeover, a mooted Xbox port, and a delay to 2003. 2003 came and went without word, other than the word 'maybe'. "It was absolute publisher hell," Levine says. "But we own the franchise now, and we love it enough to make sure that it comes out in the state that it deserves to come out in. And that may take a little time." It's encouragement enough for another few years' vigil: we've been pacing ourselves, after all.



"I'VE WRITTEN COMPLICATED GAMES WITH COMPLICATED MOTIVATIONS, AND IT'S SO MUCH EASIER WHEN CHARACTERS CAN SAY EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE THINKING AND DOING"

This cross-hemisphere development environment would be reprised with *Tribes: Vengeance* and the current *Freedom Force* sequel, impressive feats considering the fraught nature of development teams working together across an open-plan office, let alone across time zones.

"We use a virtual private network, source control on all our files, and lots of email, lots of phone calls. Jon maintains weekly meetings: he's the best manager I've ever known. It's very collaborative: Robb [Waters, *Freedom Force* artist] and I have just been coming up with ad copy, and we'll send it to [Canberra] art director Ben Lee's father, who's a graphic designer: he puts it into Quark and sends it back here... We are the 21st century company. There's so much data transfer back and forth."

If Canberra's journey from startup to shipped title was proof it had maintained Irrational's ability to produce bottled lightning to order, taking on *Vengeance* must have been a daunting follow-up. Many Looking Glass fans had expected the Boston studio to develop the title, in some sort of karmic absolution for the promised-but-never-delivered *Terra Nova* multiplayer (*TN* developer Dorian Hart, now working on *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich*, looks haunted at the mention of it: "We were so horrified when [Looking Glass] marketing



The Boston *Freedom Force* team's area is a good example of Irrational's pressure-cooker development environment: the schoolhouse meets dormitory room look continues throughout



said they'd announced a multiplayer add-on – we knew we'd be apologising for years.")

"We gave it to Canberra primarily because the Looking Glass experience pool doesn't help that much with the multiplayer-oriented games," Levine says of the decision. "And we were still working on our previous game at that point – Canberra had just formed, they'd never touched the Unreal engine or an FPS before, but they were the team that was available. And they did an amazing job for their first time out."

As could be expected from a fanbase as savagely territorial and divisive as that of *Tribes*, *Vengeance*'s departures from the hardcore canon earned it some spectacular displays of message board enmity, a situation Irrational is no stranger to. "*Shock 2* was a very different game from *System Shock*, and some people hated those changes. When we finished *Shock 2* I read every post on the internet about it, and I got an arrow in the heart every time anyone said anything negative," remembers Levine. "With *Vengeance* we knew the choices we made would alienate part of the community, but it was designed to bring in new players: *Tribes* isn't exactly a friendly game. I was absolutely positive there would be *Tribes 2* fans that

MODERN MEDICINE

"I should say right now I can't talk to you about *BioShock*." We try not to wince as Levine explains that Irrational's recently announced dark sci-fi will, for now, be a topic for speculation rather than discussion.

Speculation, then: what *is* known about *BioShock* is that it will reunite much of the original *Shock 2* team – some from as far away as the other end of Irrational's offices – for a firstperson descent into a hybrid-infested medical experimentation facility, steeped in mind games and body horror. As could be expected from confessed min-maxing addicts, weapons can be jury-rigged into progressively more devastating arrangements, creatures photographed to uncover weak spots, and, alarmingly, the best way to beat the hybrids is to join (yourself to) them – upgrading your abilities by grafting on the genetic material you recover.



can rework it to their own preference, and also because Irrational has been able to grow it from scratch. "With a publisher IP, you're picking up legacy relationships between the publisher and the community. Gamers like to bash publishers, and Vivendi get a lot of shit, but none of it was ever about 'let's put out a cheap game, and fuck the fans'. I think what people most misunderstand is that the choices are almost never malicious or greedy – anyone who thinks that a game developer is greedy, certainly an independent game developer, just has no understanding of the financials of this business. On the other hand, the community

"ANYONE WHO THINKS THAT A GAME DEVELOPER IS GREEDY, CERTAINLY AN INDEPENDENT GAME DEVELOPER, JUST HAS NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE FINANCIALS OF THIS BUSINESS"

would have issues with it – I'll tell you a story. I was in a game store in San Francisco and couldn't see *Vengeance*, so I asked the clerk if they carried it. He sniffed 'Yes', and I told him I couldn't find it on the shelves. He replied: 'Well, I don't want just *anybody* to buy it.' He was keeping it behind the counter until he found someone who was worthy of joining the *Tribes* community."

Levine describes the *Freedom Force* community as far more accepting, in part because of the game's mod-friendly nature, ensuring players unhappy with game tuning



"There is crossover with our fans," Levine says, "but some groups like *Freedom Force* and others like *Shock 2*, and you can't please everybody. So we do different games to please different people"

are the customers, and it's completely their prerogative. I would never bash the community, as they're our bread and butter: we need them more than they need us."

Current project *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich*, then, is a mutually beneficial group hug, of as much sentimental importance to the developers as its fanbase. And as Irrational's first sequel where it actually created the original title, the liberation is palpable. "We knew we could focus on the original fanbase because of the success we had with *Freedom Force* – completely to the surprise of the publisher, I guarantee you, as they didn't believe in the title or spread our voice," Levine declares. "When you create a franchise you're responsible for both its creative life and its business life. So in the States we're publishing *FFv3R* ourselves, and we were going to do the same in Europe until we got a call from Digital Jesters, who understood the game so well and were so enthusiastic about it that they convinced me they'd get behind the game. If you look at what EA did with *Freedom Force* – no offence to EA, but it wasn't a title they got behind. It was a labour of love on the corporate side too: we had to do the game, get it out there, fight with the publisher, much like with *Shock 2*."

It's clear that for a self-described 'failed scriptwriter' – "I'd done some stuff for Paramount, which I think got me the job at Looking Glass. I'm not sure why else they would have hired me," he explains airily – Levine has thrown his all into both Irrational and the games industry. Ironically, during the development of *Vengeance*'s singleplayer Vivendi drafted Hollywood writers in to rework his original storyline: "That was a new experience for us – not necessarily the most rewarding one, because the most important thing for the story to do is support the game. And that often requires simplifying your story, because games aren't novels: I always said with *Thief* that I'd rather have backstory about his moss arrows than some thirdparty event you never see in the game. So I'd written the script, the Hollywood writers rewrote it, Vivendi hated it and then I had to do a last-minute rewrite from scratch and change the missions at the end. It was a very strange process."

Stranger still, we suggest, to look back through the Looking Glass to the writing process he originally followed. "I was in the weird position on *Vengeance* of being a writer arguing against the importance of writing," he agrees. "When I came into the game space, what I loved was the notion of emergence, which Looking Glass really pioneered, and Rockstar later popularised – I always feel the gamer can write a better story than you can. But I can't tell you how many times I've done a pitch meeting on a game and publishers just want me to tell them about the story. I tell them: 'Frankly, I'm going to pull that out of my ass later on, because that's the easy part.' Getting the game produced, balancing it... running a small games company is so much fucking harder than writing game stories. It's strange to be most recognised for the thing that's the easiest."

If there's something missing from Irrational's unpredictable, brilliant trajectory through the games industry, it's to have described that same arc across the console market. From the Dreamcast *Shock 2* port joining that console's eternal list of could-have-beens to *The Lost*'s repeated disappearing acts, we wonder if the experiences have convinced even Levine to play partisan to PCs, but he remains platform-agnostic – "It's just a matter of making games that are right. Some are right for both platforms, some aren't" – and doesn't discount a return to the living room, publishers willing.

"The problem I get with publishers is that they tell me a console game has to be an action title. But there's so much min-maxing



Freedom Force team members enjoy the last of the Boston sunshine, clockwise from left: writer/executive producer Ken Levine, concept artist Robb Waters, designer Alexx Kay, lead designer Dorian Hart and associate producer Bill Gardner. Absent are sound designer Eric Brossius and the Canberra developers

nerdiness in games from *Dark Chronicle* to *Gran Turismo* – and I love that, I'm the guy who sits there with *Diablo* comparing every gem with every weapon – there's so much complexity on consoles. But there are lessons to be learned, too. I always make the joke that if Looking Glass had made *GTA*, they could see the concept that made it possible, but if they had made it you'd hit W to run, F1 to open the car door, Shift-F2 to pull the guy out, Alt-Ctrl-Tab-something to get into the car… I remember the fights we had on *Thief* over mouselook, or remappable keys. It was their old-school thinking, and the great thing about games like *GTA* is that they say: 'Here's the emergence, but rather than burden you with complexity, we're going to make the game interpretive of your intentions.'"

Emergence – the USP on everyone's box, but one that few seem to be able to describe, much less implement – is the thread that brings Irrational's games together, from *Shock* to *BioShock* (see 'Modern medicine') and





The conspiracy of the recent multi-project workload and office *SWAT 4* deathmatches has seen the football table fall into disuse, but we're still hoping for a replica in a *BioShock* back room

"ANYBODY IN THIS OFFICE IS TALENTED ENOUGH TO GO TO EA AND GET THE BONUS PLAN, BUT THEY STAY HERE BECAUSE THEY HAVE A PASSION FOR THE GAMES WE WANT TO MAKE"

beyond. "The common theme is: 'Give the player the choice about how they approach any situation.'" Levine answers with so little hesitation we don't finish posing our question. "Our games are about giving players a problem and a big box of tools. I like Irrational games when the walkthroughs are pretty meaningless. With *SWAT*, every mission, every loadout of your team is different, the enemy placement is random, their morale and weapons and tactics change and we give you a mission maker which lets you change every parameter – starting in different places, giving





Levine's storyline for *Vengeance* made a space opera out of a team deathmatch, using the surprising focal point of a mother and daughter, as with *The Lost*: "A lot of people said the story was simplistic, but the challenge is how complex you can be while you're also playing an FPS"

you different goals. In *FFv3R* it's any hero you want to make, any superpower you want to give them, any environment you want to play in – we let people form their own strategies. That's the heart of an Irrational game."

It's the heart of Irrational itself, too, the reason the same names appear in the credits of each release (usually multiple times, as most staffers briefly give up their day jobs to do voice-over work in the 'not-entirely soundproofed' conference room/recording studio), the reason it's a small developer with big gravity, drawing in talent from development backgrounds as geographically diverse as Reflections or MicroForte. "Anybody in this office is talented enough to go to EA and get the cafeteria and the bonus plan, but they stay here because they have a passion for the games we want to make and the work environment we want to be in," says Levine. "That ethic drives everyone here. You don't need to manage people if they want to get the job done and they care about it."

It's a perfectly – almost disappointingly – rational explanation: the same train of thought that gave Levine his second wind back when his company had no money, no project and an uncertain future. "It occurred to me this was the moment when most people quit, when it's just too difficult, and I think a lot of the trick to succeeding in a small business is not quitting at that moment. It's not really intelligence, or skill, it's the ability to recognise that if you quit now, you'll never pull it off. And a week later we got *Shock 2*."



FOR FREEDOM

IRRATIONAL CRAFTS AN UNREALISTIC WWII STRATEGY TITLE

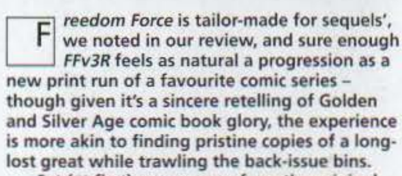
TITLE: **FREEDOM FORCE VS THE THIRD REICH**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **DIGITAL JESTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**







Yankee hero Minuteman and the cockerny Blackjack (partially obscured by KAZOW!) battle Fortissimo's minions with *FFv3R*'s newfound graphical vivacity



Freedom Force is tailor-made for sequels', we noted in our review, and sure enough *FFv3R* feels as natural a progression as a new print run of a favourite comic series – though given it's a sincere retelling of Golden and Silver Age comic book glory, the experience is more akin to finding pristine copies of a long-lost great while trawling the back-issue bins.

Set (at first) one year on from the original game's flag-waving 1962, *FFv3R* returns to a Patriot City where hero-endorsed public service hoardings adorn the tower blocks, peace and prosperity reign, and a Cold War supervillain plots terrible revenge. After a brief episode in Cuba involving nuclear warheads and time travel, the heroes return to find the world in the thrall of the Reich, now the Energy X-aided victors of the Second World War. Naturally, one good timeslip deserves another, and the Force returns to the '40s to battle the Axis super-superpowers and set things right.

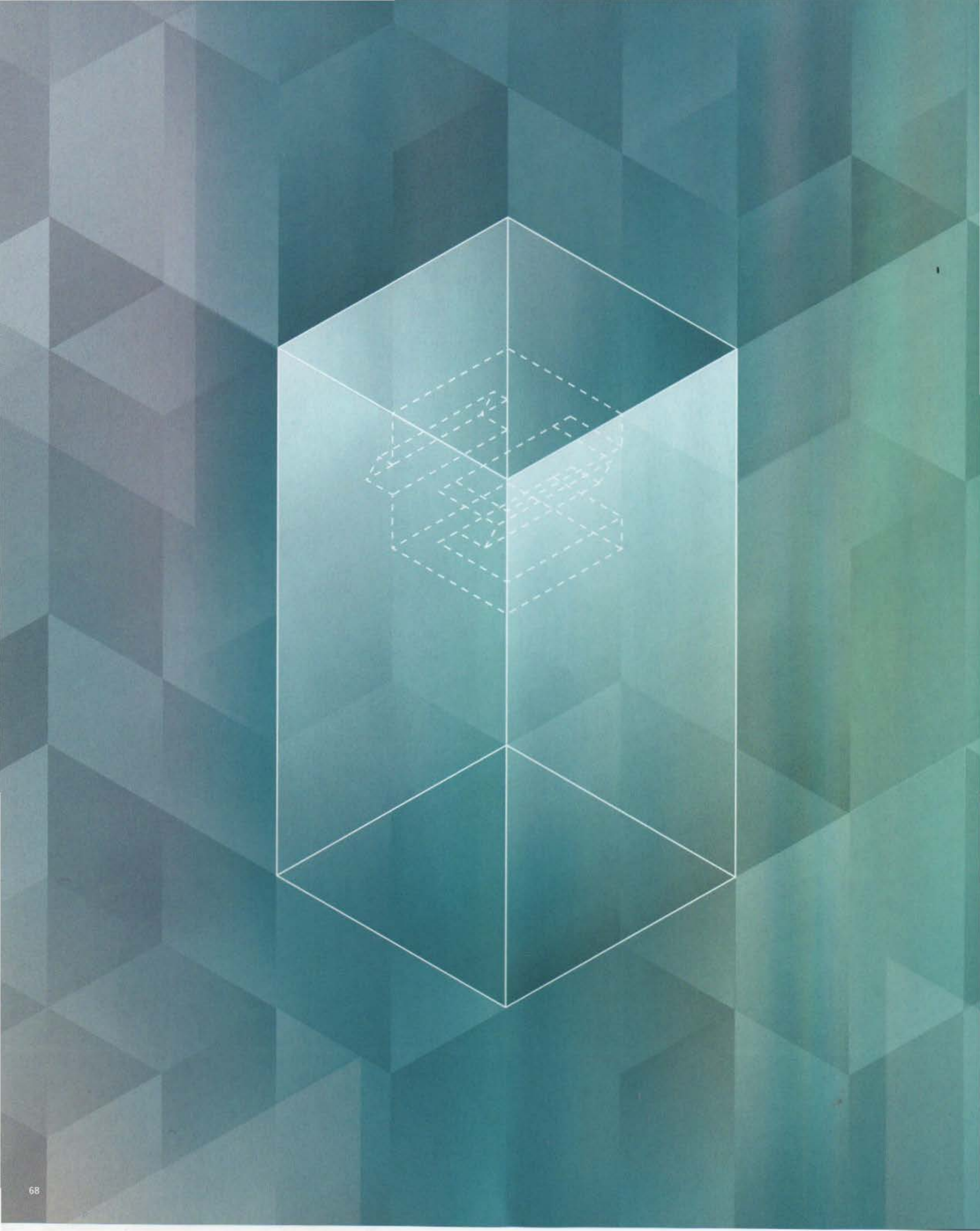
Aided by a cast of new heroes, including a splendidly stereotypical contingent of gadget-wielding '40s resistance fighters – the French Tricolour, English Blackjack and American Skyking – it's the same freezeable realtime strategic skull-cracking given the tweaks, upgrades and careful additions of an unhurried development. The team confess that the original title was rushed out the door with 'painful' multiplayer, among other balance and polish issues, and these have been comprehensively addressed and finessed. In singleplayer, the menu-driven control for launching punches, powers and scenery has been streamlined, and idle heroes' AI ramped up to make managing a split team less fraught (though not to the extent that a hero can survive without any player interaction).

It's the multiplayer that has received the most sweeping changes, though, in no small part because the singleplayer was remarkably solid to begin with. The original's slogfest deathmatches are still possible (though governed now by comprehensive balancing/unbalancing options), but the most appealing addition is story-based multiplayer, allowing episodic team content with all the breadth of the singleplayer storyline. Several Irrational-built missions will ship with the game, but it's the mod community that will be running the printing presses after launch, with every parameter of a story-based mission starting from its cover artwork open to modification. The team suggests a mission could be cast entirely with Allied and Axis soldiers to create a powers-free wargame, although we suspect most players



won't be able to resist slipping in a fire-spewing, building-collapsing superhero – especially with heroes and powers remaining player-definable.

Described as a 'superhero toolset', *FFv3R* is as much about providing gamers with the ability to make their own game as providing them with one that stands alone. It's perfectly capable of doing the latter, with Levine's storyline relentlessly playing off the pathos and humour of its source material, but the game's greatest asset looks to be Irrational's explicit trust in the intelligence and creativity of its players.



EDGE AWARDS 2004

Films are good. Music's great. Books are worth a look. But only games get better every year, and 2004 was no exception

It's been a long year, and it's been a good year. The point of awards is not simply to stick spangly stickers on to games that have already received their fair share of applause. It's to refine our understanding of what makes the best the best, and to map out the new borders of what gaming is capable of. Between them, the winners over the next six pages illustrate what new territory gaming has captured since the last **Edge** Awards: graphical excellence which is as much an emotional and aesthetic achievement as a technical one; innovations which prove that gaming is still discovering new ways to play; overall excellence which has exceeded a world of exulted expectations and proved that some things really are worth the wait. And, speaking of which, here's to 2005...

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR
BEST GAME



HALF-LIFE 2
Format: **PC** Publisher: **Vivendi** Developer: **Valve Software**

Sometimes there really is no contest. The decision to award a 10 is always as agonising as it is exhilarating, but Valve produced an experience that left no other option. It's not just the game's visual impact, or the refinement of a storytelling system which is as devastatingly simple in practice as it is difficult to engineer in design. Not just the pacing and structure, which pull you with their own inexorable gravity through a game where you never feel as if you've lost your autonomy. Not just the unexpected touches of humour, as confidently self-aware as they are deftly placed. Nor the utterly convincing creation of a living, suffering city achieved with a handful of NPCs and some astute audio design. You recognise a 10 by the moments, by the anecdotes that you can feel branding themselves into your memory, which you know instinctively will somehow be unique, even though everyone you speak to has played the same extraordinary game as you have.

RUNNERS UP:

ZELDA: FOUR SWORDS ADVENTURES
Format: **GBA/GC** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house**

A perfect expression of Nintendo's living tradition, *Four Swords* absorbs and reworks the breadth of *Zelda*'s visual tradition and reforms it with revolutionary play mechanics.

HALO 2
Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Bungie**

While the singleplayer lacks the purity that made the first so remarkable, the multiplayer, with its endless subtleties and lavish web support, is almost entirely beyond criticism.

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR
INNOVATION



HALF-LIFE 2
Format: **PC** Publisher: **Vivendi** Developer: **Valve Software**

Think back to E3 2003, when you first saw the gravity gun. Long before *Second Sight* or *Psi-Ops*, Valve was promising something which no one, in the meantime, has been able to eclipse. Finally wielding it, after months of imaginings, is no disappointment. Already starting to show its real potential in early deathmatch maps, it's a subtle and creative tool rather than a dumb, digital weapon. The gravity gun, however, is only the start of the impact *HL2*'s physics makes on the game you play. It strengthens the story and your emotional connection with the game's world. It allows for a new kind of problem solving, where intelligence and reason replace dumb-luck trial and error. It's fitting that Freeman is a scientist, as *Half-Life 2* is the player's laboratory, a world of exploration and experimentation tied into a compelling narrative and proven game structure. For too long we've been stuck with ragdolls, as pointless as they are boneless. *HL2* gives us physics we can build with.

RUNNERS UP:

KATAMARI DAMACY
Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house**

Perhaps the only game this year which was genuinely and entirely new, *Katamari*'s near-perfect execution was a delicious bonus.

ZELDA: FOUR SWORDS ADVENTURES
Format: **GBA/GC** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house**

For years we've had polar cooperative play and competitive play. Nintendo is the first to allow players to indulge their natural impulses and freely phase from one to the other during the game.

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR

BEST VISUAL DESIGN



HALF-LIFE 2

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Vivendi** Developer: **Valve Software**

You have five senses. Games have two. Through sight and sound alone they strive to create worlds not just as rich as the one we live in, but richer. *HL2* is simply, starkly beautiful, but the 'realistic' detail amounts to something far more than a bullet point for the back of the box. The scuff and stain on the wallpaper tells as much of the game's story as the dialogue. The lighting makes you shiver and sweat. The humanity of the virtual mannequins you meet tears into you far more than a construct of polys and textures ought to be able to. The simple splash of a yellow lambda on a canal wall has an aesthetic, emotional and informational impact on you as you play. This is what we hoped for from *HL2*, but what we hadn't expected is how well it scales. The game we all thought we'd need a new PC for still conveys a great deal of its impact on less powerful machines.

RUNNERS UP:

FAR CRY

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **Crytek**

The game you did want a new PC for, *Far Cry*'s searing tropical palette still draws gasps, even on the hundredth viewing.

KATAMARI DAMACY

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house**

A paragon of low-poly character design, *Katamari*'s inanimate objects had more character than most game heroes, and their shift from pastel to primary hue is a simple touch of genius.

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR

BEST AUDIO DESIGN



THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

Format: **PC/Xbox** Publisher: **Eidos** Developer: **Ion Storm**

Eric Brossius' soundscape for the first *Thief* was a revelation, both in execution – it can't have been easy to create a soundtrack that heightens rather than muffles the player's ability to hear vital cues – and quality, providing layers of organic texture and significance. The final episode in the trilogy cements that achievement, flowing from gentle melancholy to disarmingly intoxicating warmth to scratching, insidious menace. Over those sonorous background tones, the sound effects are the definition of taut: the creak of a bowstring, a caught breath, the urgent scrabble of lockpicks on tumblers and the rich, yielding click as they finally turn. It's telling that so many titles use an urgently pounding heartbeat to turn the thumbscrews of tension, but *Deadly Shadows* only coaxes your own. In *Deadly Shadows*' world, silence becomes something you can hear.

RUNNERS UP:

KATAMARI DAMACY

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house**

With the advent of sweeping scores and licensed tracks, games don't have themes you can sing any more. *Katamari* has one you can't stop singing, as well an exceptional library of spot sound effects.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Rockstar** Developer: **Rockstar North**

The other side of the coin. Rockstar North continues its masterclass in using tailored soundtracks to involve and delight players.

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR

BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE



HALO 2

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Bungie**

At this stage in the gaming lifecycle, it's as unsurprising to see the online section as dominated by console games as the visual category is by PC titles. This isn't an award for best online game – these fight it out on even terms for best game overall. This is an award for games using their online nature to provide something unparalleled, and 2004 was the year that consoles brought their distinct gaming style to the online space with emphatic and widespread success. *Halo 2* does for online deathmatch what the first game did for the FPS. This isn't a revolution, but a perfection. Learning from years of PC iterations, Bungie has provided a system with flexibility, solidity and style, harnessing every strength of both Live and the internet to provide a peerlessly elegant and engaging online experience.

RUNNERS UP:

MONSTER HUNTER

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **In-house**

Monster Hunter brings intimacy, subtlety and drama to the online arena, which can so often be dominated by games which offer only empty scale or banal repetition.

FINAL FANTASY XI

Format: **PC/PS2** Publisher: **Square Enix** Developer: **In-house**

No game has done more to break down online boundaries, uniting continents and gaming tribes by bridging PS2 and PC communities into one entranced community.

THE 2004 **EDGE** AWARD FOR

BEST DEVELOPER



ROCKSTAR NORTH

Games: **Manhunt, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas**

With it all to lose and nothing to prove, it's easy to overlook how unenviable the position was for the most successful development team in the world. With every excuse for complacency, and every chance innovation could wrong-foot its legions of fans, Rockstar North could have chosen to play it safe. Instead, *San Andreas* made bold choices: a black hero, an unfamiliar (for many) setting, a geeky RPG spin on a tough-man mainstream game. It should have come as no surprise after the fresh and provocative *Manhunt*, although that game's successes have become overshadowed by the gaming industry's inarticulate failure to defend the medium's ability to explore mature themes. Between them, these two games demonstrate Rockstar North's sensitivity to gaming's wider cultural context and its immunity to being led by focus-tested trends.

RUNNERS UP:

THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

Game: **Rome: Total War**

Rome's scope and excellence would be reason enough for an award, but Creative's creative approach to working with television points a viable way forward for independent developers.

SONY LONDON

Games: **SingStar, SingStar Party, EyeToy: Play 2**

Reaping fertile ground, the sophistication of *Play 2* and *SingStar's* flawless presentation extended gaming's reach as well as its range.

THE 2004 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST PUBLISHER



NINTENDO
Games: **Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga, Donkey Konga, Metroid: Zero Mission, Zelda: Four Swords Adventures, Pikmin 2, Metroid Prime 2: Echoes, Mawaru: Made In Wario, Zelda: The Minish Cap**

The list above, though incomplete, speaks for itself. For a while it seemed that Nintendo had swapped its policy of drip-feeding its customers perfected nectar for a gush of disappointments, but this year things have stabilised in spectacular fashion. Those lamenting the lack of a 'real' *Mario* and a 'real' *Zelda* would do well to plunder the treasures listed above. Nintendo is engaging in a logical impossibility: mining seams of IP in a way that enriches rather than depletes. To complain that there's nothing original is to ignore the inventiveness on display – from *Mawaru*'s twisted ingenuity to *Four Swords*' technical and visual imagination, and from *Pikmin 2*'s careful refinements to *Donkey Konga*'s raucous rhythms.

RUNNERS UP:

ROCKSTAR
Games: **Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Manhunt, Red Dead Revolver, Max Payne 2**

They said it was going to be a one-trick pony, but with *Red Dead Revolver* and *Manhunt* Rockstar has demonstrated a level of perceptiveness and lack of fear that has other publishers envious.

UBISOFT
Games: **Far Cry, Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow, Harvest Moon: It's A Wonderful Life, Advance Guardian Heroes, POP: Warrior Within**

Not as stellar a year as 2003, but Ubisoft's management of its talented internal teams is well-complemented by its eye for interesting independent projects from around the world.

THE 2004 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST HARDWARE



NINTENDO DS
Developer: **Nintendo**

Sometimes the secret of success is timing. A by-product of the intimidating speed with which Nintendo has fired up its vision of the future is that the DS just scrapes into these awards, whereas the PSP will have to wait for next year's. Already the DS feels like an old friend, snapping shut around strange new worlds as you toss it in your bag without a second thought. Even now that we're familiar with all its quirks, it's still hard to imagine where the DS's strange mix of hardware will take its games. And it's that potential that wins it this award, rather than its rather chunky looks or the frustrations of solitary dead pixels. The first generation of software is half genius, half rehash, but as *Pictochat* becomes part of your daily life, *Wario Ware* leaves you huffing at virtual birthday candles and *Daigasso! Band Brothers* brings coop gaming into a new, tuneful era it's clear that the DS has already delivered on its ambitious promise: to bring new kinds of gaming to new kinds of gamers.

RUNNERS UP:

GAMETRAK
Developer: **In2Games**

A true hardware winner, Gametrak is yet to convince on the software front. However, by finally delivering on gaming's long lost promise of full motion sensing, it deserves more support.

MAWARU: MADE IN WARIO
Developer: **Nintendo**

It's not the twist sensor that deserves recognition, although it works soundly enough. It's the tiny fizz of vibration which connects you perfectly to the lunacy unfolding in the palm of your hand.

THE ALTERNATIVE **EDGE** AWARDS 2004

It's tradition to give gongs to the big hitters, but gaming is often about the little things that usually get forgotten. Here are eight that made gaming great in 2004





MARIO IN HIS PANTS

Game: **Mario & Luigi: SuperStar Saga**

There's little about the game that isn't a pure delight, but the sight of Mario, still steaming from his shower, bouncing on the head of an overcome Toad is utterly unforgettable. Luigi has never had much personality, but the idea of him cohabiting with Mario has an air of Morecambe and Wise about it that's impossible to resist.

ZUPER ZUNO

Game: **Siren (preview code)**

***Siren* was a sickeningly frightening experience, leaving players desperate for a respite from the keening and panting of sight-jacked zombies. Thoughtfully, the preview code contained the unexplained *Zuno*, a simple puzzler to soothe the soul in between bouts of desperate anxiety.**









MY PAL RICHARD

Game: **Donkey Konga**

The Japanese release of *Donkey Konga* was slightly underwhelming, mostly due to the lousy soundtrack it shipped with. News of the reworked PAL track listing was like pennies from heaven. Most astounding was the inclusion of Supergrass's mighty Richard III, which suited the big dumb ape better than anyone could have guessed.

ASIAN PLAY

Website: **www.playasia.com**

Things were bad enough when it was just good prices and fast delivery. Then freebie packs of sour plum sweets sent loyal customers into raptures. But in the end it was the toys. Anyone with a spare Christie from the *Dead Or Alive* gashapon set can apply for swapsies at the usual Edge address. We've got a spare Helena.









SMELLOVISION

Game: **A Dog's Life**

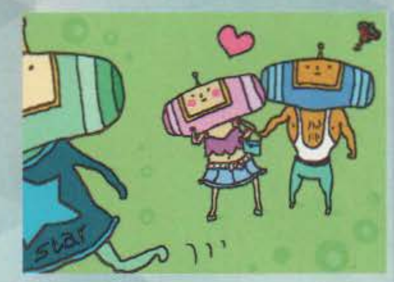
Although aspects of it disappointed, David Braben's *A Dog's Life* delivered what games have been crying out for for years. Not (of course) the ability to carry your own faeces in your mouth, but the carefree Technicolor of chasing smells. A game where you literally follow your nose.

ORIGAMI NOSES

Website: **www.katamaridamacy.jp**

The days before we made our King of Space noses (downloadable as a .pdf from *Katamari*'s peerless website) were long and dark. It's also not clear how we managed without our *Katamari* chopstick holders, bookmarks and the finest selection of desktop wallpapers ever created.









PIPED PARIS

Game: **Project Gotham Racing 2**

The spectre of console games going the way of patch-dependent PCs crept a little closer this year, but *PGR2* was ready with the other side of the coin. £3 to extend the life of an already ample game and reinvigorate the pleasures of Live play seemed like a very happy bargain.

A ROSE BY ANY NAME

Radio station: **K-Rose**

The gangsta 'thang' may have initially overshadowed every other aspect, but *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* eventually revealed itself to be a many-layered beast. And peeling back those layers to the accompaniment of Willie Nelson's matter-of-fact Crazy or Eddie Rabbit's warming I Love A Rainy Night was for savouring.





Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing...

Halo 2



The internet support may be the best around, but little beats system link three-on-three – in separate rooms to aid scheming, of course.
XBOX, MICROSOFT

No-one Can Stop Mr Domino



And that's the truth. Fiendishly hard at times, deliriously satisfying at others, no game has come close to the cyclical insanity of its design.
PS, ARTDINK

Half-Life 2: Deathmatch



After curling a car down the street on to fleeing players or crushing a distant sniper with a filing cabinet, how can guns ever satisfy again?
PC, VIVENDI

The other MMOs

The future of massively multiplayer orchestras



Band Brothers may use a modern visual language of CDs, sliders and multi-coloured LEDs, but the kind of play it recreates has existed since mankind invented the drum

Gameplay is a word that upsets many gamers. Too often used as a meaningless piece of jargon, it's losing its usefulness as a quick shorthand for the structure of a player's actions in a game. It's little wonder it's so misunderstood, however. It has the misfortune to be built on two of English's toughest words to define.

We'll leave 'game' for now – apart from anything else, this is a magazine that devotes a hundred pages a month to trying to pin down the exact extent of what a game can be. Let's shift the question down the line and settle for the idea that a game is a mechanism which enables play. So what is play? There are thousands of texts and treatise on the question, dancing across the boundaries of dozens of academic disciplines. Often the focus is on play as a model for real-life activities. Whether it's playing at suburbia in *The Sims* or at war in *Full Spectrum Warrior*, a common way of understanding play is as a safe environment in which to experiment with reality. Now, thanks to advances in game physics, a new kind of play is beginning to dominate: the just-because joys that stacking and smashing in *Half-Life 2* delivers so well.

But there's a kind of play that gets overlooked, and that's the kind that people do when they play the guitar or in an orchestra. It's not the kind of play where you can win or lose, and yet it's enormously satisfying. There are no characters or dialogue and yet it's profoundly moving. It's creative yet you don't make anything. In many ways it's the most intriguing and open-ended notion of play, and so far it's the one which gaming has explored least.

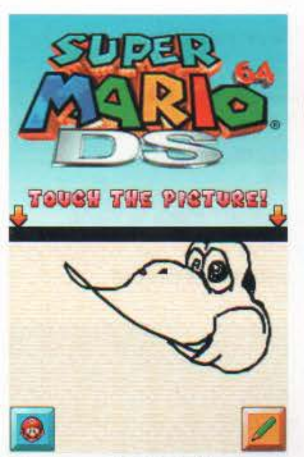
Daigasso: Band Brothers, following in the footsteps of *Rez* and *Frequency*, is the first game to make this kind of harmonious play a social reality. All you need is one person with the game, and wherever you go you can assemble an instant scratch orchestra. At the moment the skill level is low and the repertoire limited, but there's no reason that can't change. Eight-part harmonies are old fashioned compared to the sequencer-inspired visions of *Unity* and *Funkydilla*, but it delivers in one package more new ideas about games, play and gameplay than we've managed to borrow from Hollywood in a decade.







Edge's scoring system explained
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



Before you reach the irresistible minigames, you can play with Mario and Yoshi's faces, in a neat little homage to the original's opening screen. As well as stretching and twirling them, you can draw and deform your own sketches



SUPER MARIO 64 DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£16) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Ever since its release, gaming commentators have struggled to write the perfect essay on *Mario 64*. Something to capture its accomplishments as eloquently as it catalogued its flaws; something to convey its irrepressible joy as well as codifying its structural innovations. But doing justice to the dynamism of videogames with staid, static words has never been easy, and Nintendo has just rendered the exercise entirely pointless. This DS conversion is the finest dissertation on *Mario 64* you will ever read.

It's hard to imagine a more thankless task than being asked to retool a game which is famed for the perfect symbiosis it shared with its original platform; it's also hard to imagine how the company could have done a better job. *Mario 64 DS* is a testament to how well Nintendo understands its own game. What makes it so interesting is that it's also a testament to how much and how little gaming has changed since Mario first woh-hoo'd his way into 3D.

Mario 64 – whether on an N64 or a DS – is extraordinary. It's become a trope of lazy journalism to accuse every derivative platformer of the last eight years of being an equally lazy 'Mario clone', but none of the copycats have come anywhere close. No one has dared replicate the freeform structure, leaving scores of challenges open to the player at any one time. No one has hidden whole worlds away, curtained behind fake walls and disguised by magic mirrors. And those worlds themselves are like nothing before or since. Rather than taking its set of building blocks and skinning each identikit level in spring/summer/winter or lava/ice/beach, Nintendo takes you to places which are intimidatingly bizarre. Instead of safe, flat playgrounds or fat tunnels of fun, these are levels that have outhouses, detours and lost, subterranean towns. They're irregular and asymmetric, awkward and intriguing, and the changes that you ring – though basic and blocky by current standards – remain magical. For nostalgic veterans and wide-eyed newcomers, Mario offers as vibrant an adventure now as he did then.



Which is all to the good, because it's an adventure which is fundamentally incompatible with the DS's controls. Let's be clear: the controls work. There's no doubt that they function effectively and it's an enormous credit to Nintendo that they do so at all. The three options allow you a good choice of compromises, swapping between D-pad and touchscreen with easy – and necessary – improvisation. However, even once you've rewired your brain to adjust to these new control patterns, it will never feel like anything other than a compromise. The elation of simple movement, which will perhaps remain *Mario 64*'s most significant contribution to the gaming canon, cannot be replicated on such an ill-suited device. And the consequence of this inherent clumsiness is a subtle and strange recalibration of the familiar *Mario 64* universe.

Planks are wider (or is Mario smaller?), enemies have shrunk (or has Mario grown?).





New bosses call for new powers. Mario can supersize himself, which makes this giant Goomba easier to defeat



Some sights are almost as awe-inspiring now as they were eight long years ago. It's in these notoriously tricky later levels that the shortcomings of the new control systems become most clearly exposed









Multiplayer courses include slide races as well as battle arenas. For added confusion, character-swapping caps are dotted around each level, letting you morph from one Mushroom Kingdom stalwart to another

Red blocks can contain flowers, which bestow special powers on each character. Yoshi can breathe fire, Luigi pass through mirrors, doors and enemies, and Mario floats like a balloon





An unexpected consequence of the rejigged control system is that both flying and swimming have become easier. This removes both some of the joy and the frustration

New power-ups are tucked into the game's tougher challenges, letting Mario float dumbly up to a precarious ledge where once he had to scramble smartly. The three other characters all possess abilities which shortcut the game's challenges, letting you hover mid-jump, run over water or destroy multiple enemies. But even once you've explained these away in terms of the hampered control scheme, the concessions keep coming. Helpful bob-ombs now provide a map for each level's eight red stars, taking some of the challenge (and all of the frustration) out of combing each area for that tell-tale wink of scarlet. It seems that Nintendo has looked at the new generation of gamers the DS is intended to court and decided that they aren't up to the starkness of the challenge on which the last generation cut their teeth.

It has certainly decided that they have more delicate eyes: as part of Mario's reworking, his colours have been muted and modernised. The sharp blocks of pure primary have been replaced with softer, subtler textures. It's a purely aesthetic change which some will resent and some will applaud, but what's inexplicable is the reworking of NPC design, the elegant cartoons of the original having been replaced with the bug-eyed, fat-grinned caricatures of a thousand kids' TV shows .



The other additions – the silver star challenges, the hidden levels, the extra boss battles – range from harmless bonuses to genuine improvements

It's a rare lapse of judgement. The difficulty tweaks and the new characters are a necessary and appropriate evil to sustain the game in its new, twin-screen environment. The other additions – the silver star challenges, the new hidden levels, the extra boss battles – range from harmless bonuses to genuine improvements. The minigames (see 'Mini mope') will become constant DS companions, and multiplayer (beamable to other, non *Mario*-equipped DSs) successfully replicates the knockabout amusements of *Mario Kart*'s Battle mode.

It's clear what *Mario 64 DS* is. Nintendo has sped its console to market in a timeframe which left it needing a revolutionary launch title and not enough time to make one. As a result, it had to abandon the possibility of making a new game to showcase the DS's strange talents, and settle instead for making new a game it already had. It succeeded, but *Mario 64 DS* is a magnificent execution of entirely the wrong content. Happily, despite its age, that content is so robust and remarkable that the result is still surprising, spectacular and, yes, downright Super. **[8]**

Mini mope

The minigames are *Mario 64 DS*'s final contradiction: a kiss on the cheek and a kick in the teeth. Despite very obviously being designed to cater for those moments when you're sick of (or stuck in) the main game, or when you want to demonstrate the DS's touchscreen to a sceptical friend, you'll have to unlock each one in turn by catching rabbits with each of the four characters in the main game. It's an unnecessary restriction on one of the game's greatest strengths. These are some of the finest idle diversions unleashed since *Tetris*.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£ 26) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), SPRING (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E125, E138





Firstperson gunplay will be a rude shock to the circle-strafing generation. Rooted to the spot and reticule-free, you'll have to guide your wavering aim with the sight on your gun. Holding your breath and tensing your arms aren't necessary, but it's so convincing, you will anyway

There's something about that subtitle... *Snake Eater*. Does it sound absurd or sinister, virile or camp? Was it meant as cheap innuendo or dark, Freudian suggestion? Was it intended to ring with mythic mystery, or flatly point to the game's USP? After playing (and watching) this extraordinary new entry in Hideo Kojima's idiosyncratic series of spy thrillers, the answer would seem to be all of the above. Few games have ever ranged so far and wide in tone or style. Few have ever been so obsessed with realistic minutiae or so lofty in their ideals, yet so happy to unsuspend disbelief for the sake of a surreal non sequitur or saucy visual gag. This is an experience that verges on the schizophrenic.

Metal Gear's mix of staccato stealth action and grandiose, long-winded cinematic drama has always been an acquired taste, albeit one acquired by millions. Let's be clear from the outset: *Snake Eater* will not make any new converts. The first few hours of a certain (and certainly familiar-looking) Naked Snake's Cold War mission to rescue a defecting Soviet scientist are smothered in drawn-out cut-scenes and codec chatter to the point of suffocation. The most interesting and exciting moments refuse the player admission, and there is barely enough space in the interactive cracks between them to get a feel for the extensive changes wrought by the game's jungle setting and survivalist manifesto: camouflage, hunting, eating and auto-surgery. And these, too, can be quite alienating, slowing the pace of action and progress even further, and requiring plenty of menu-dipping.

That's unfortunate, because the frustratingly stern realworld stipulations of this template are the seed of a remarkably involving, satisfying and fresh experience. Provided he eats, and tends to more serious wounds with medical supplies, Snake's health will recover (Kojima and Bungie both wish to wipe the health pack from our screens, it seems); but if his stamina dips low, he becomes sloppy, emits telltale stomach rumbles, and his aim falters. So you must collect and hunt for food, suspiciously trying out new eats for taste and effect. Sustaining yourself through a mission this way, or noticing exhaustion set in during a silent sneak or frantic battle, more than doubles the immersion, tension and sense of adventure the game provides.

The same is true of the astonishingly atmospheric jungle and swampland. Represented in a moody, near-monochrome palette and with the hoots and rustles of a brilliant surround soundscape, necessarily teeming with edible life, it's the key component of what must be the most technically and artistically refined audiovisual experience on PS2 to date. Peering into the murky tangle to find your mark ramps up the challenge, while laying, camouflaged, in short grass inches away from a patrolling enemy is a gripping twist on stealth. The terrain opens up many new tactical options, although setting up unarmed kills or knockouts proves to be difficult, and it's all too easy to fall back on sniping at every opportunity.

Unfortunately, *Snake Eater*'s riveting spell is almost constantly broken. Don't think too hard about the fact that you can stop to eat





Snake Eater's character art is simply exceptional, gingerly treading the finest of lines between realism and comic-book fantasy. The quality of the motion capture in cut-scenes – and, by extension, the physical acting that it was captured from – has to be seen to be believed

Sustaining yourself, or noticing exhaustion set in during a silent sneak or frantic battle, doubles the immersion, tension and sense of adventure

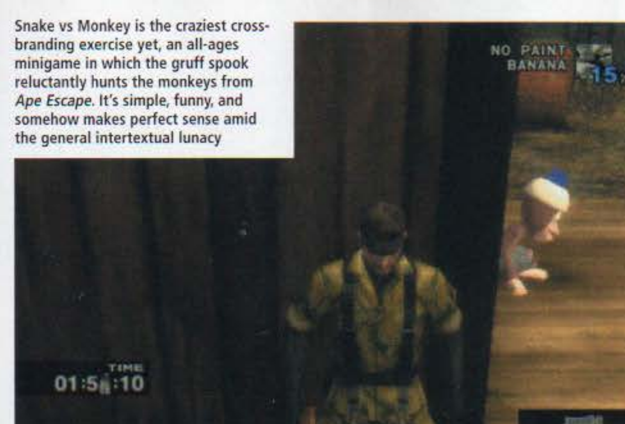


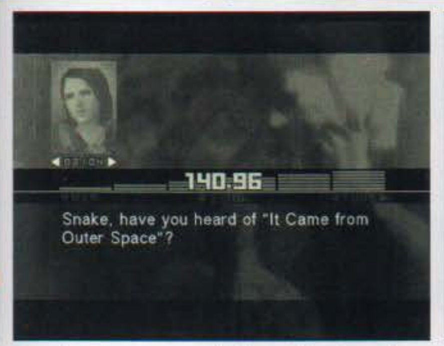
Although patrolling guards will stretch your senses to breaking point, you can't ever afford to become oblivious to your environment. Crocodiles are almost invisible underwater, until they launch an attack





Snake vs Monkey is the craziest cross-branding exercise yet, an all-ages minigame in which the gruff spook reluctantly hunts the monkeys from *Ape Escape*. It's simple, funny, and somehow makes perfect sense amid the general intertextual lunacy









Every time you save, Para-medic (this year's love interest) offers a lecture on the cinema of the day, from Godzilla to Dr Strangelove. It's an indulgent but endearing namecheck of influences, but the codec is still clumsy and wearisome

Unsurprisingly, the interface and frontend boast peerlessly classy graphic design, especially the cure screen. Item and weapon-selection system has never been bettered, but you'll need to deal with more inventory management, and shortcuts for camouflage and food, than would have been appreciated



Crawling into long grass toggles you automatically into firstperson mode, perfect for keeping tabs on the movement of enemies. You won't be spotted, even at close quarters, so long as your camoflague matches the foliage that surrounds you

or change clothes mid-gunfight. Try not to notice the way slain prey dissolves into floating item boxes, or Snake's occasionally clumsy interaction with an organic world that doesn't fit the right-angled, laser-like precision of VR training. Don't get too irritated at the inflexible dichotomy between firstperson view and the traditionalist, narrow top-down camera. Really, don't, because it's this anomalous tension between real life and videogames, historical fact and wild fiction, that sparks so much of the self-referential joy and loving invention present in *Snake Eater*. It's what makes possible the utterly insane level of detail and quantity of Easter eggs, intricacies, jokes, permutations and unexpected consequences that will have fans returning to the game time and time again. Once cut-scenes loosen their stranglehold a little and set-pieces seep into actual playtime, *Snake Eater* is constantly surprising and delightful, and you'll want to see the operatic storyline all the way through to its stunning conclusion.

There's something curiously old-fashioned about it all – and that's not a reference to the immaculate 1960s period detail, which is in fact a very refreshing milieu for a videogame. No, it's that *Snake Eater* is an nth-degree extrapolation of a formula that was daring and profoundly influential back in 1998, but has long since been overtaken by events. Where the likes of *Halo*, *Riddick* and *Prince Of Persia* seek to strip away the accumulated clutter and arcane syntax of videogames, *Snake Eater* elaborates on them; where other titles aim to envelop you in a live-action blend of spectacle, storytelling and gameplay, *Snake Eater* keeps these segregated, and you at an ironic distance. It's not just the retro-tech on display here that smacks of yesterday's future.

Perhaps, though, we should be grateful for Kojima's stubborn pursuit of his quixotic, outmoded (and very Japanese) ideal. He may be tilting at windmills, but if nothing else it's a personal vision that's been realised in fully loaded, big-budget blockbuster glory down to the tiniest detail – and that's a rare enough thing in cinema, never mind videogames. Ultimately, *Snake Eater* is so much more than it could have been. It's the most loveable, exasperating, unhinged, pretentious, ambitious, gorgeous, funny, tedious, thrilling, subversive and just plain silly *Metal Gear* yet. It's the most *Metal Gear Metal Gear* yet, a franchise turned in on itself, a snake eating its own tail. It's perversely wonderful. **[8]**

Film '64



Since so much of *Metal Gear's* substance is movie, it begs to be reviewed as such. Action is flamboyantly directed and crisply edited. It's visually exciting and evocative, beautifully shot, and makes good use of archive film and hand-drawn segments. But the script ranges from awkward to awful, cute laughs and nice character work far outweighed by graceless exposition and weak, leaden sermonising on war and peace. And the acting is worse. David Hayter's performance as Snake is execrable, an unmodulated, mechanical growl which crushes the humour, pathos and sometimes the plain sense out of every line he stumbles across. Worst during the interminable codec conversations, *Snake Eater's* speech is not up to the standard of other games, let alone cinema, let alone cheap TV. In fact, it's embarrassing.



SHADOW OF ROME

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (US), £40 (UK) RELEASE: FEB 1 (US), FEB 18 (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E144



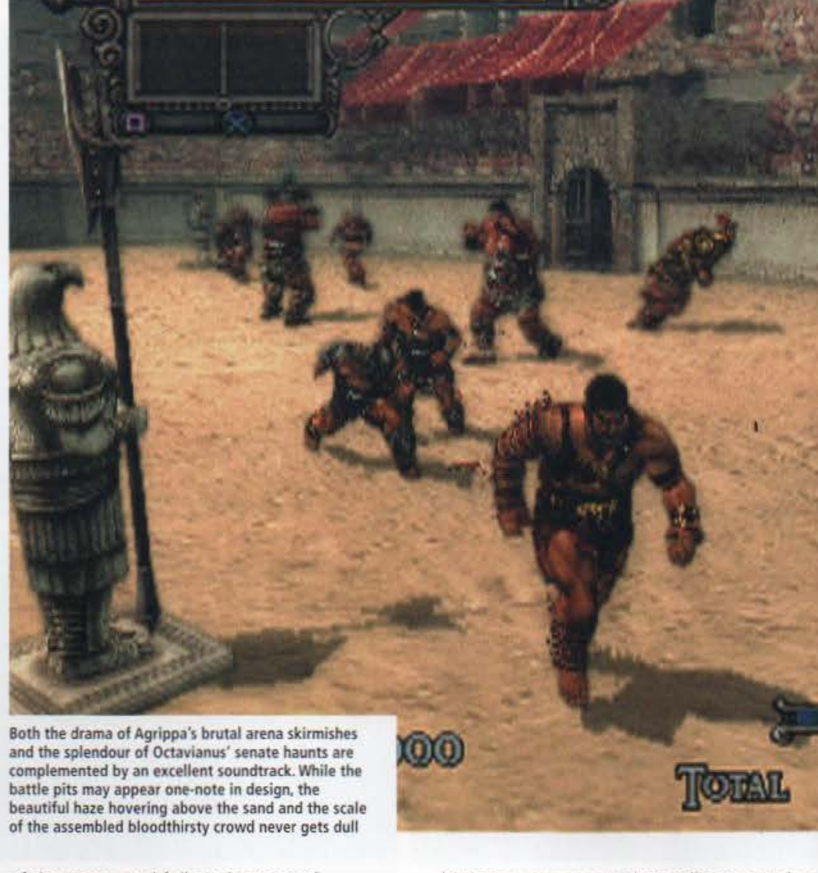


The game's map is a close relative of *Hitman*'s excellent realtime blueprint, showing the location of every character, their status and movements as well as the direction they face. Objects of interest – such as banana skins, rats and collectable coins – are also displayed

A towering brute of a man stumbles groggily, his feet shoving little dunes into the sand as he shuffles forward. His right arm – severed above the elbow – dribbles dollops of fresh arterial blood, the thick stump presenting a bone sliced so cleanly that only a halberd, or maybe a scimitar, could be the culprit. The estranged limb is nowhere to be seen, but it is in fact just a few metres away, being wielded by another man as a warm, makeshift bludgeon. It's no matter – his right hand tightly clutches a dagger, and that's enough to keep him in this fight. Until, that is, a maul – a giant mace with prickles the size of T-rex teeth – comes hurtling down on to his skull, squashing his head like a Juicy Tomato. The crowd roars. Juicy Tomato. It's one of their favourite Salvos.

OK, so such wannabe-creative writing review intros are usually reserved for WWII and Vietnam games, as writers try to stress the importance of atmosphere and setting through anecdotal example, but that sentiment actually rings true here: the scene described above is *Shadow Of Rome*'s crowning moment.

These battle arenas make up a rough half of the game, and follow the story of centurion Agrippa as he fights to get close to his imprisoned, condemned father. They brilliantly capture the glory of the gory and the sickeningly explicit violence-as-entertainment of gladiatorial combat. However, the moment *Shadow* steps away from this purity of vicious spectacle, and asks something further of the player than just crowd-pleasing murder, then it edges into far less enjoyable territory. While Agrippa is essentially the hero, the game also follows the espionage activities of wimpy Octavianus, flicking back and forth between the pair's entwined story. But it's not as simple a case of it being just a game of two halves.



Both the drama of Agrippa's brutal arena skirmishes and the splendour of Octavianus' senate haunts are complemented by an excellent soundtrack. While the battle pits may appear one-note in design, the beautiful haze hovering above the sand and the scale of the assembled bloodthirsty crowd never gets dull

hitting an opponent who's rolling around on the floor in torment after suffering an amputation. The aforementioned Juicy Tomato comes from shattering a head with a mace blow. The Meat Sculptor accolade is gained from hacking off more than one limb in a single swipe. Red Volcano is the all-too-vivid image of a combatant being chopped in half. Had enough yet? The fact that there are nearly 200 of them is testament to *Shadow*'s elaborate combat system, which features myriad weapons, attack methods, counters and scenarios. These brawls are beautifully excessive, but there's a sluggishness to the controls that is a mixed blessing, making Agrippa feel clumsy at times but adding some hefty, vicious weight to every lunge and slash.

> All the brutality and bloodthirsty excess of Caesar-era slave-pit rumbles with a refreshing lack of inhibition compared to console shooters

As mentioned, Agrippa's battle sections are a spectacle, capturing all the brutality and bloodthirsty excess of Caesar-era slave-pit rumbles with a refreshing lack of inhibition when compared to the supposedly 'realistic' action of bloodless, squeamish console war shooters. Thanks to the Salvos point-scoring system, there's a tongue pressed firmly in cheek, and fittingly so for something that revolves around a society so willing to wallow in the ghoulish bloodlust of mortal combat.

Salvos are *Shadow*'s equivalent of noteworthy attacks and combos, and are morbidly named: Urine Trouble is awarded for striking someone while they're wetting themselves. Sadist's Utopia is triggered by

The game is at its best when you're in a free-for-all rumble, and the stickiness of character movement is eclipsed by the frantic, epic nature of it all. But when Agrippa's goal is something more focused – such as having to escort a hostage, slaughtering tigers or working as part of a team to destroy the statues of an opposing team – it can easily frustrate. During survival matches against multiple foes, the fact that their blows – including whirling morning star swings and the like – harm only you is galling, as you're left to hack away gingerly at a wall of lethal assailants whose combined strength is made to feel unfair.



Weapons include heavy maces, bows, slings, daggers, scimitars, shields, morning stars and more, providing a dizzying number of combinations. Flaming torches can also be wielded to blind and repel whole groups of enemies, or used to ignite opponents doused in oil











Any of Agrippa's stages cleared in the story mode can be revisited in a separate challenge mode, allowing you to cherry-pick the battles you enjoyed the most for replay. Cheats are unlocked for attaining bronze (or better) awards



Playing to the crowd will reap you extra weapons and food, depending on your popularity. Once your Salvo bar becomes completely full, a Roman Spotlight appeal will often yield a monstrous halberd, or even the invaluable Magnus sword

Octavianus' sections, however, are relatively free from annoyances, but they rarely feature any amount of interesting challenge. Most of these sections are lifted directly from the Big Book Of Stealth, and involve plenty of skulking, knocking guards unconscious and stealing clothes. The fact that just one hit is all it takes to slay Octavianus means there's often little room for error, and that the bulk of each scenario involves simply feeling out the lie of the land before performing the straightforward act of getting to wherever needs to be reached. It's not as bland as it sounds, and is made likeable by some quirky, if hollow, features – the slapstick of watching a guard take a comedic tumble on a well-placed banana skin, for example, or getting the chance to incite a crowd to civil disobedience by addressing them from a nearby rooftop. These stealth sections do, however, work on two levels. They forward the story in a far more meaningful manner than just another post-boss cut-scene, and they provide a gentle respite from the aggressive, relentless pressure of Agrippa's physical trials.

It's almost as if Capcom has distilled its *Onimusha* series, extracting the two core components of the franchise – epic, fierce confrontations and puzzle-pocked exploration of lavish settings – and given each more room to breathe, with their own character, style, atmosphere and pace. The result doesn't add up to anything greater than what has gone before, but a number of the individual facets – the glorious, searing frenzy of combat and the deliberate stop-start nature of play – feel greater than they ever have. *Shadow* has the same ingredients of many a game that has gone before (well, except for the Juicy Tomatoes), but it's a whole new remixed recipe for Capcom's 3D adventures. Fresher, but not better. **[7]**



Rome's equivalent of Team Capture The Flag is typical of the game's tendency to falter when pressing the player to achieve more elaborate goals. It's difficult to form any kind of strategy when your team is less capable of mobilising than your respawning opponents

No place like Rome



Perhaps emphasising the difference between the characters a little too strongly, Octavianus gets to while away his spare time with some shopping. Once you've found enough silver coins, a visit to the city gates will reveal a marketplace packed with vendors eager to sell you a range of furniture and goods with which to spruce up Octavianus' room. A colourful rug? Some shiny china? A primitive dartboard? Or how about a new hairstyle? These home comforts are a suitably far cry from Agrippa's own fashion options (Mace? Dagger? Mace and dagger? Dagger and mace?), but add a laidback collection element to the game for those moments when the overkill of violence begins to jade.

Both characters can lock on to any objects and people in the vicinity, although Agrippa's errant reticule can prove to be all too eager to focus on an irrelevant item in the distance. Such problems can be simply overcome with a flick of the right analogue stick, however





The base characters you fight are still the same clumsy robots, but they come with some new looks and attacks. Agile ninjas, dangerous reapers and nurses – wielding glowing syringes, naturally – brighten up the game



VIEWTIFUL JOE 2

FORMAT: GC (VERSION TESTED), PS2 PRICE: $40 (£21)
RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E137



The Six Machine isn't free from Sylvia's influence, as she alters it from a missile-firing submersible to an aquatic tank





A tap of the Z button will change characters in real time, allowing for advantageous combos but leaving you open to attacks



The Zoom function remains one of the most breathtaking in practice, but its use is essential for Ukemi and Sexy Pose moves



Slow down, and zoom in on those screenshots. You're going to have to, just to make sure that you're not seeing the exact same game that was reviewed some 18 months ago in **E**127.

Viewtiful Joe 2 is a sequel that seems to have been made at Mach Speed: despite the change in specific themes and settings, the scenery looks like it was pulled straight from the exact same box of heavily pencilled, thick-cut props as the original. Joe's inertia feels unchanged, as does his repertoire of VFX-power moves – based on movie editing operations such as fast-forward, zoom and slow – which haven't been given a significant upgrade. The levels are still acts based on extremely hazardous, hyperactive movie spoofs, split up into scenes and set-pieces. The Six Machine returns to offer a shoot 'em up spin on the side-scrolling action. And there's still a sardonic voice waiting to reel off a thorny soundbite when the game is paused.

Unlike, say, *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, however, it doesn't feel like it's given any ground for this second helping. *Viewtiful Joe 2* feels snappier and chunkier, if no more imaginative than the original, with its puzzles and encounters paced in a far more enjoyable and edible manner. It's not as tough per se, but it's just as tricky to excel and earn those rainbow ratings.

You may even have trouble noticing *VJ2*'s biggest addition in among those shots, too – Joe's girlfriend Sylvia. Despite making thrusting cheerleader poses and reeling off heart-shaped bullets, she doesn't feel as new as you'd expect from such an addition. But it's a testament to how well she's been integrated into Joe's flow more than an accusation of laziness. As well as offering gunplay – and the ranged attacks therein – Sylvia offers a Replay power in place of Mach Speed. It's actually far more limiting than it sounds, allowing you to repeat only certain attacks and actions three times over in quick succession. This is a blessing, however, as it's this limit that allows Replay to be mixed into the action as yet another layer of VFX power that feels instantly useful and comprehensible, and not some terrifyingly imposing time-flow possibility.

Puzzles based on VFX skills are abundant compared to the original, and can vary from the acute to the obtuse, from the obvious to the oblivious. The logic behind these compact conundrums is often twisted to the point that solving them feels as much like experimentation as applying deliberate thought – but it's deeply enjoyable experimentation nonetheless, and few puzzles refuse to reveal themselves long before all possibilities are exhausted. Levels feel more segmented and less regimented,





and the better for it. There's no cheap, wholesale reduction of difficulty, just what feels like a more balanced play experience.

The infamous, infuriating boss spats of the original still feel tricky here, but they allow for a brand new tactic: the slog. While players adept at wielding Joe and Sylvia's intense powers can carve themselves ever swifter and sleeker paths through climactic face-offs, less able players aren't punished with anything but a longer wait as they chip away with inferior, but not pointless, tactics. It's not become any easier, but it has become less punishing. For anyone heartened and spurred by the cruelty of the original, however, *VJ2* isn't short of harsh proving grounds. Quarantined into a separate section called 36 Chambers is a series of challenges that offer a chance for the dedicated to flex their VFX skills in a dedicated gymnasium, and takes deft skill as a prerequisite. Clover Studio, it seems, has answered criticisms of alienating difficulty not with compromise but with an inventive partition.

Despite sharing some remote-control powers with both Blinx and the prince of Persia, Joe can't rewind time. His (and, now, Sylvia's) game is all about moving forward, about editing yourself into a frantic, continuous take of action; *Viewtiful Joe 2* itself may not have actually moved forward in any serious manner, true, but it remains completely faithful to the delightful, colourful, ultraviolent slow-mo ballet that made the original so energetic and refreshing, while smoothing out some of the wrinkles. For newcomers, it's welcoming and charming. For returning fans, it's refined and thoughtful enough to instantly engage.

Visually, it's as playful and quirky as ever, but there's nothing as impacting or as glorious as when you first laid eyes on *Viewtiful Joe*. Still, it's a game with enduring length and depth, and controls that remain as faultless and sure-footed in practice as any game around. As a sequel, it's not so much an extension as a remix, but one so capable and confident that 'remix' could very well be one of Clover Studio's own personal VFX powers.

[8]



It remains completely faithful to the delightful, colourful, ultraviolent slow-mo ballet that made the original so energetic and refreshing

Sylvia's Replay power is a straightforwardly powerful move that won't baffle newcomers any. Her funky style extends to a pair of pom-poms and a gun that fires a limp extending boxing glove when VFX reserves are depleted









Imagine *Paper Mario* made from thick, grubby but vivid cardboard and you'll get an idea of how *VJ2* looks in action

Hint-man contracts



While performing well has always been rewarded with higher ratings and hardcore difficulty modes, *Viewtiful Joe 2* goes one step further – backwards, even – by giving you something when you die. An intricate hint list is available to view between stages, and each tip is unlocked depending on the section of the game that defeated you. Some of them are fluff, but a lot are genuinely insightful and provide a neat, if cruel, way of allowing the player to explore the game's finer details without recourse to a FAQ or forum. Of course, a more up-front method of hint delivery would have been preferable, but one thing's for sure: unlocking them all will be a strangely confusing feat for completists.





Succesfully landing tricks fills up your boost bar, which is triggered by dropping into a crouch and helps you gain height off ramps



EYE TOY: ANTIGRAV

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£26) (INCLUDING EYETOY)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (USA), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: HARMONIX PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

Speed of slight



Antigrav has two play modes – Style and Speed. Style is the more successful, setting you a score target and encouraging you to go for big air and inaccessible rails; Speed is a straight race against CPU boarders. Bonus points are converted into speed boosts, and the tracks differ subtlely across modes to maximise their tricking/racing potential. Bizarrely, to 'win' a track in Speed mode you have to race it three times in a row, coming first each time. It's a thoroughly demoralising piece of design: 'Hey! You just proved you could do something. Now do it twice more for no reason. Sucker'.

There's a moment when *AntiGrav* makes every game you've ever played seem ridiculous. It comes when you're explaining the controls to a curious friend, and you find yourself saying, "Jump is jump." But jump *is* jump. Duck is duck and left is left. It's a system so simple it ought to take no explaining, but so radical that it needs quite a lot. *AntiGrav* is a future racer that uses hoverboards, which you control entirely via Sony's EyeToy. On screen, you see an avatar that copies your movements, tracking your hands and face as you move. Lean left and right to steer, perform elaborate arcs with your hands to trick and, yes, jump is jump.

The hoverboards have three modes: ground mode works like a straight snowboard game, with ramps, half-pipes and obstacles. Rails let you lock on, riding their rollercoaster curls while you swipe at passing targets with your hands. Flight has hints of *PilotWings*, disabling your trick moves while you steer yourself through rings that boost your points or speed. Each 'track' offers dozens of interchangeable routes, letting you swoop down from flight mode to land on a rail, or boost up from a ramp to catch the first in a series of rings.



Impressive stunts can be pulled off by simply windmilling your arms, but the big points come from following the cues at the bottom of the screen, which trigger each character's special moves. Pick-ups (right) let you trick at double speed

It's wildly exhilarating, and it's wildly exhilarating because it works, but that's not to say it works perfectly. The usual EyeToy fuss with lighting is required, although the game offers a dim-room setting and constant access to its recalibration system. When playing, your movements need to be measured and precise or the camera can lose track of the lock it has on your face. Stand up too fast from a crouch and the game will read it as a jump. Practice unquestionably helps, but you'll need to keep a constant eye on the motion tracker in the corner of the screen, which lets you see where the game *thinks* you are, and adjust your movements accordingly.

Overall, it's a technical triumph. Allowing for the amount of processing the PS2 must be running on camera input, the vast levels which launch you hundreds of feet in the air and dazzle you with neon and sunlight are a remarkable accomplishment. Aesthetically, Harmonix takes another slide away from the bold style of *Frequency* into generic sci-fi hokum, but it's hard to hold this against the developer. The complexity of the elaborate tracks goes some way to explaining why only five are available. Music, meanwhile, comes courtesy of the studio's close relationship with Apollo 440.

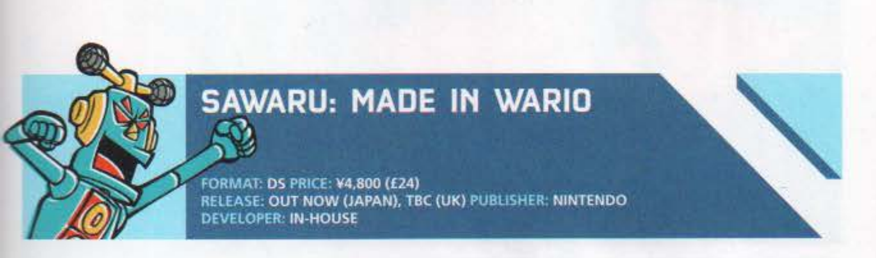


To some extent, *AntiGrav* is as good a game as you're willing to make it. Persevere to perfect the right lighting conditions and learn the game's slightly idiosyncratic perception of your movements, and it is an unparalleled experience, if a slightly shallow sports game. **[7]**



To switch on to alternate rails, you'll need to hit a series of switch icons. It's tricky, but worth it for high point scoring shortcuts





SAWARU: MADE IN WARIO

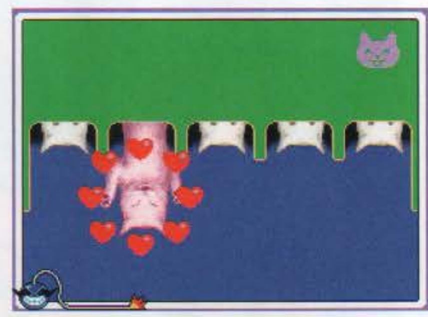
FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's been just shy of two years since Nintendo decimated the world's attention span. Those 21 months have been a whirlwind: four games, three platforms and four input devices. In three-second bursts, Wario has proven himself master of the D-pad, the analogue stick, the tilt sensor and now the touchscreen. For a game with such a reputation for its brevity, the *Made In Wario* team has demonstrated a degree of protracted effort that is almost unnatural.

From the first announcement, the Nintendo DS was a machine that needed some explaining. From the beginning, *Sawaru* has needed none. The game fits so well on DS that it's hard not to feel that the game was the inspiration for the hardware rather than the other way round. *Wario* was never a simple reaction test – it was always about coaxing your brain to make constant lateral hops from one obtuse challenge to the next. The physicality of the DS makes those hops less abstract. Now your instinct doesn't need to be translated into button presses. Confronted with a too-hot cup of tea, you don't need to be told to put your lips together and blow (the hardware's microphone picks up your breath). Faced with a page of maths homework, you instinctively wield your stylus with the cruelty of a teacher's red pen. In some ways, this immediacy makes the game easier. In others, because the range of scenarios the game can conjure up increases, it makes it harder. Veteran *Wario*-ers may also find the more familiar puzzles (of which there are only a few) rather paralysing: two of your three seconds can tick away as you reach for the D-pad or try for a tilt before you remember which *Wario* you're playing.

That's not to suggest that this game is a rehash. What has become habitual is the glorious presentation and the excellent sound – sparkling effects and tiny slivers of pop perfection. It's this union of pure play and pristine presentation which makes it possible to launch three sequels in less than two years. The fact that *Sawaru* came close to outselling *Mario 64 DS* during the Japanese launch week shows how much appetite there is for the kind of gaming *Wario* delivers.

It may be formulaic, but that formula is still one of invention, surprise and excellence. By the time you reach Super Wario's triumphant nostril safari, you'll have gasped, laughed and cursed just as vigorously as you did 21 short months ago. **[8]**



As with previous *Wario* games, many are worth losing just to see the fallout of your failure. No matter how much photorealism the game's graphics use, the results of your actions are rarely exactly what you'd expect



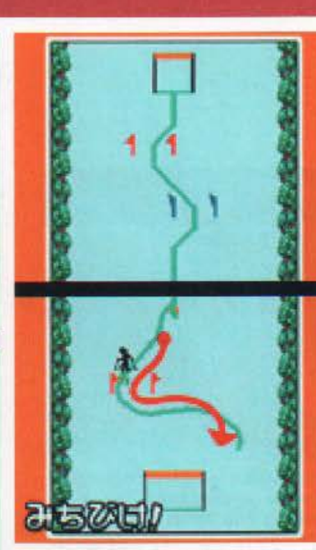


The traditional one-word exhortations still begin every minigame, although many are so recognisable as real-world processes that you'll have played and won the round by the time you remember to read what they say



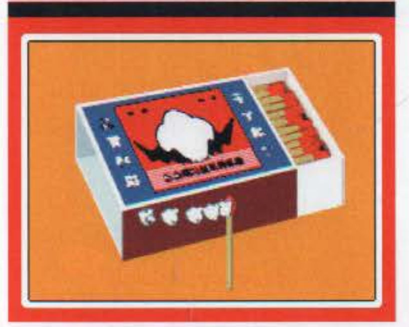


Some games take a little skill. Here, test your timing as you spin the shotputter with the stylus and set up his launch



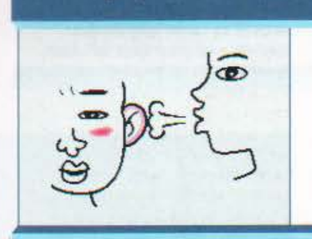
Drawing a simple line shouldn't be much fun at all, but many of *Sawaru*'s best games ask you to join the dots, whether between skier and finish line, battery and lightbulb or dynamite fuse and spark





Some real-world activities lend themselves to *Sawaru* translation so perfectly it beggars belief. There'll be few who'll fail to get this challenge within an instant

In through your nose



Wario is billed as the game you only need a stylus to play, but that's not quite the truth. New character Mike competes on a karaoke stage, and you'll need the microphone for his games. Blowing yachts across finish lines and spitting gum in strangers' faces is the kind of thing that can make people move away from you on the Tube, so you may wish to tackle Mike in private. Beware later mix-up levels which throw the odd microphone game into stylus-based epics. Your need to not make a fool of yourself may be less than your hunger for a hi-score.



SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £35 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI **DEVELOPER:** FIRAXIS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E142

Seventeen years on from Sid Meier's original *Pirates!* the game returns to familiar shores, this time bearing the riches of 21st century graphics and presentation. All the original elements of the 1987 game have been resurrected, including swordfighting with enemy captains, realtime ship-to-ship combat and grinding through naval ranks to make play with the prettiest of governors' daughters. This is a faithful remake with a touch more complexity, but it nevertheless lacks deeper substance.

This modernised version is thickly glossed with 3D visuals and an aesthetic that mixes the sensibilities of *The Sims* with sea-shanty-singing *Sea Dogs*. All sunshine and brass-fonted menu screens, *Pirates!* is a rose-tinted buccaneering adventure with a light dusting of politics and humour, intended to appeal to a wide audience of gamers.

Much of the game takes place on menu screens, with trading, tavern-visiting and ship upgrades all being essential to progress. But the core of the experience comes in piloting a ship, first on a 3D map and then in a closer combat view. This structure makes for an open-ended career where you roam freely, deciding which ships to plunder, which ports to support and which pirate captains to duel. When a crew becomes unhappy the spoils can be split and the options to either go on as before or increase the level of difficulty can be selected. Your piratical career is almost completely unconstrained, to the point where it's possible to simply trade various goods, fattening towns and working the best trade routes to make your money.

Of course, any captain worth his beard will want to plunder the sea-lanes, and that's where the most entertainment lies. In port it's possible to pick up some hot tips and missions, allowing for attacks on vital shipping and sabotage of political envoys that don't lean in your favour. The combat, all tacking in the wind and getting a broadside on the enemy ship, is subtle and demands a certain level of skill. This amusing tactical escapade is in stark contrast to the other thirdperson action sequences – swordfighting and dancing. In these you need to hit a sequence of keys suggested by flashing icons, which proves not the least bit intuitive and detracts substantially from the ease of play. Worse, though, is the feeling that the game simply lacks depth. Elements such as marching on to an island, or talking to a governor, seem flat and undeveloped. The islands are sparse and awkward experiences, while their governors are often illogical and nonsensical in their responses.

Pirates! is a game that progresses by getting harder without ever becoming more sophisticated, and as a result it can prove tiring. And doesn't the wind ever blow from the west? Sailing home to Jamaica really shouldn't be this taxing. **[6]**

Strictly ballroom



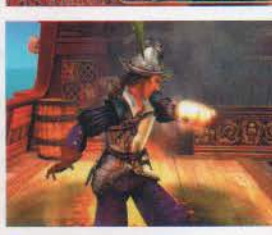
Possibly the toughest challenge the sea captains face is that of getting their hands on the prettiest of governors' daughters. Impress a governor with rank and wealth and he'll introduce you to his offspring, but even the plain Janes can be tough to charm once you've managed to attain a suitable title and taken them to the ball. The dance sections may initially leave you feeling disorientated and strangely embarrassed. Best to quickly set sail to cover any further evidence of your two left feet.



Striking a balance between weakening a ship and blowing it out of the water can be tricky when using bigger ships





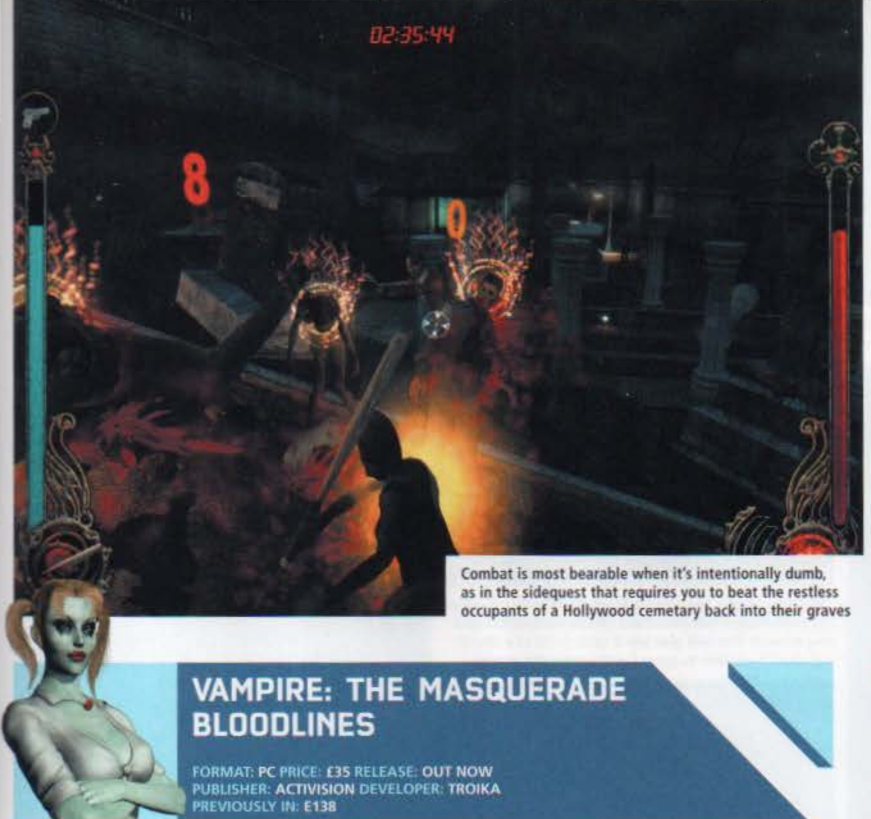


The swordfights look entertaining but the obtuse control method means that players will often miss most of the action waiting for cues or get soundly thrashed by the opposing captain





Lovely ladies provide gossip and some motivation for your captain to better his rank as a privateer for the various navies that vie for power in the Caribbean. Wealthy men have prettier daughters, apparently



Combat is most bearable when it's intentionally dumb, as in the sidequest that requires you to beat the restless occupants of a Hollywood cemetary back into their graves

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE BLOODLINES

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £35 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION **DEVELOPER:** TROIKA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

With Troika, refugees from the *Fallout* design team, building a suitably sordid narrative with Valve's Source engine, *Bloodlines* seemed to have the winning formula to give the Vampire RPG a *Deus Ex* treatment. And it still feels like it should have worked, as even riddled with glitches from spelling errors to crash bugs, the game's bruised, nocturnal LA perfectly portrays the present-apocalyptic Vampire world. Taking your custom protagonist out into the LA nightlife and unlife is initially beguiling, and your vampiric kin are confidently and seductively well-written.

But where NPC dialogue is suitably arch, your own lines are often cringingly sophomoric, making it difficult to roleplay anything other than an unadventurous roleplayer. Though social skills appreciably affect conversation – smooth talkers receive additional choices whereas the uncouth have their dialogue trees pruned back – you'll seldom steer NPCs far from their preordained monologues or keep them talking once their role in the plot is fulfilled. Revisiting old friends and enemies is usually fruitless, and wastes a setting as incestuously social as Vampire's, leaving the sense that the social pond is too frozen for your actions to make unscripted ripples.

Resigned to your fate as errand-corpse, not free agent (your character bemoaning constantly being sent on dungeon crawls doesn't quite excuse constantly being sent on dungeon crawls), *Bloodlines*' missions are far less interesting than the character interaction. An early railyard raid is promisingly conducive to different play styles, but it's an exception to the later rule of box-room-and-corridor slogs that belittle character choice: you can create any vampire you like, so long as it can fight scores of enemies. Neither thirdperson melee combat nor firstperson shooting are particularly comfortable, and stealth is fraught for all the wrong reasons, though both stealth and melee can be abusively overpowered.

Bloodlines could have been so much more with so much less. The plot draws on an unnecessarily large swathe of the Vampire mythos, presumably to make the storyline seem deeper than it actually is, but in practice leaving it disconnected. The horror is all gore and jump scares, with the far more affecting, personal horror of your vampiric condition almost entirely skirted. There's no sense of the crippling addiction and hunger for blood, as feeding is an utterly perfunctory power-bar-filling affair, nor the loss of your mortal life and desires (the latter is explained to you despite nearly every female character being underdressed and oversexualised).

Forgiving the source material's brow-clutching indulgences, it succeeded in providing a soul behind the vampire cliché, to be more than The Lost Boys set to a D&D beat, and that soul is something *Bloodlines* only sporadically channels. It remains compelling, but much of that compulsion is in expecting the game to truly deliver – a moment you'll likely still be awaiting at the anticlimactic conclusion. **[6]**



The quality of NPC facial modeling and voice acting varies (though the animation is almost universally impressive), but when both are at their strongest *Bloodlines* offers some truly engaging one-way conversation



LA is broken into four hub areas, accessible by a vampiric taxi service (below). It's appropriate, as sadly there's so little to do out on the town that you're simply a tourist





The physical-oriented vampire clans have it easiest in *Bloodlines*, as it's a simple, if neither strategic nor rewarding, matter to keep all their vampiric powers running and hack down respawning enemy crowds

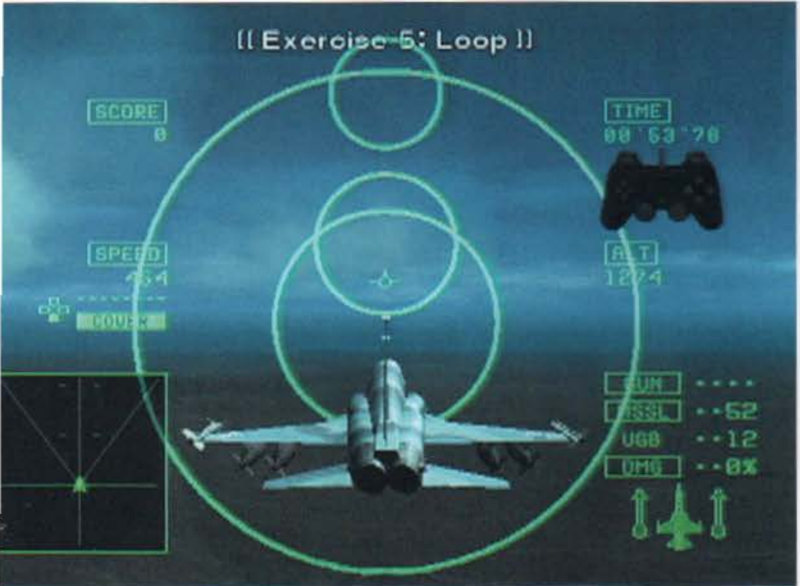
Vampyr's little helper



It's possible to gain a blood-bound human companion to guard your upmarket apartment lair – though as the sun never rises during gameplay, it's by no means a necessity – but this is as limited, and uncomfortably misogynistic, as Troika's take on marriage in *Fallout 2*. The most well-intentioned interaction possible is to turf her out, with the majority involving bullying her for blood, money or into wearing more revealing attire. Gentler souls who just wanted a shoulder upon which to cry tears of blood will be disappointed.



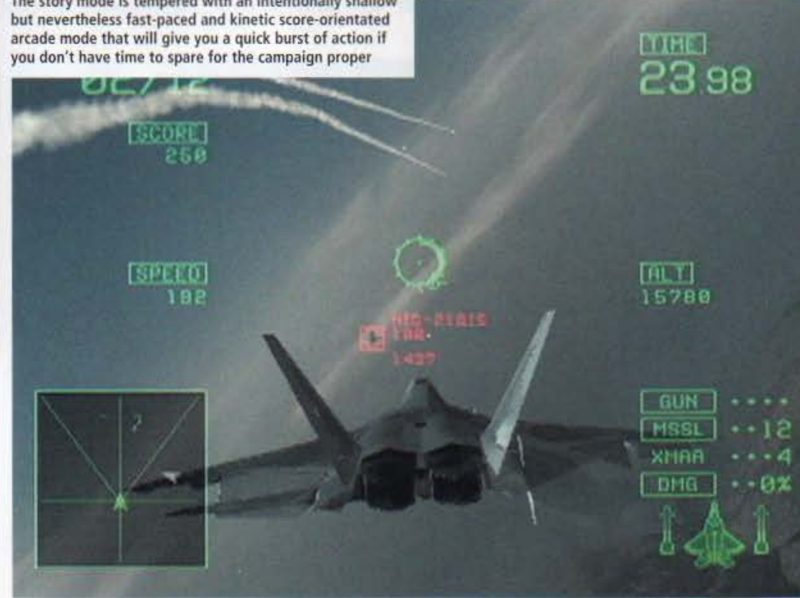
Side objectives can be unlocked during campaign missions by positively answering questions asked by one of your wingmen

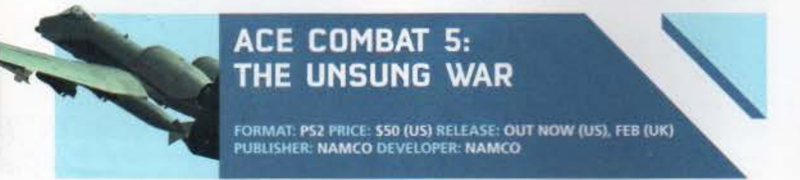


San Andreas' flight school was an upward struggle undermined by landslides in difficulty; Ace Combat 5's training mode is a little more forgiving, and much more detailed, teaching you every facet of the controls



The story mode is tempered with an intentionally shallow but nevertheless fast-paced and kinetic score-orientated arcade mode that will give you a quick burst of action if you don't have time to spare for the campaign proper





ACE COMBAT 5: THE UNSUNG WAR

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** $50 (US) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US), FEB (UK) **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO **DEVELOPER:** NAMCO

Re-classified mission



Ace Combat 5 will make its way to European stores as part of one of Namco's many publishing deals with SCEE. However, the game is getting a slight tweak in order to give it a sporting chance at retail, although it's merely a cosmetic one: the subtitle will change to *Squadron Leader* and the *5* has been dropped entirely. Distancing itself from the sequential order of the series (and introducing the subtle word connection to Factor 5's first GameCube Star Wars flight sim) may persuade prospective pilots to make a purchase.

The real thrill in *Ace Combat 5* isn't when you launch a heat-seeking missile into the tail of a rival jet, nor is it when you swoop down and machine-gun the hell out of ground-based enemy forces. Although those things come close, the real joy comes from the moments when your on-board radio spurts breathless pilot chatter, conveying far more atmosphere, camaraderie and plot than any cut-scene could ever hope to. Just like before, then.

Which isn't to say that *Ace Combat 5* is particularly good at telling a story. It's not. The plotline – crucial in an adventure where the motivations behind your attacks are a key justification – at first feels like gibberish, with scenes between each mission told from the perspective of another character living in the same military base as your pilot. Though this seems confusing, once the plot *finally* starts to make sense after a handful of missions, it becomes part of its charm; look back once you're halfway through and you'll realise that being thrown headfirst into this heavy-going war between two rival nations was really the only way to make an entrance.

But even if the context is initially a little vague, the mechanic is well balanced throughout. You fly around, shoot certain things and bomb others. Each successive mission sees an incremental increase in the might, cunning or sheer scale of your enemy. This is standard game design, of course, but the *Ace Combat* series has always revelled in this structure, and the growing scope of the campaign missions in this version is excellently measured to the point of locked-on precision. It means that you willingly sign up to the next mission knowing that there will always be another tactical surprise waiting for you.

Controls are finely tuned – as you'd expect for the fifth instalment in a steadfast series – and the consistent learning curve (aided by the optional in-depth training missions) means that latter battles are punctuated with tense dogfights and challenging attack runs. The D-pad is used to issue simple controls to your three wingmen, but this works in a manner far more satisfying than recent comparable devices in the likes of *Ghost Recon 2*.

The Unsung War doesn't break any boundaries, but it perfectly fulfils expectations. What might look unambitious is in actuality an adventure that whisks you through brilliantly rendered backdrops with a touch more polish than previous iterations, always flying hard and successfully conveying the buzz of aerial combat. Dodging, weaving and cheering when a missile hits a target in the far distance: *Ace Combat 5* is comfort food in videogame form. [7



This Top Gun-style camera angle is exciting and accessible, but it isn't the default mode – that's saved for the more intense, traditional firstperson view

Avatar customisation options are numerous, especially with regard to the physical construction of your characters. Virtually all attributes can be tinkered with, even if it's probably not healthy for a pig to have such malnourished legs

BLINX 2: MASTERS OF TIME & SPACE

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: ARTOON
PREVIOUSLY IN: E141

There is no fifth dimension in *Blinx 2*, of course. It's not so much hyperspace as just plain hype, but that reference to an extra dimension is a worthwhile one, even if it's ground that Blinx himself has technically already covered in the infuriating original. The Tom Tom Gang – the porcine nemesis of the feline Time Sweepers – are the titular masters of space; their story is now playable, and forms one half of the game.

If anything, *Blinx 2*'s major expansion is in terms of girth, making it plump with play modes. As well as the double-sided adventure that makes up the main game for a single player, splitscreen coop is offered in both advanced and standard variations. The former depends on players acting genuinely cooperatively, working in vital unison, while the latter allows for two to just play along side by side. As a possible counter to Blinx's much-maligned appearance, you'll now be creating your own team of Time Sweepers and Tom Toms from the ground up – which is a welcome addition but doesn't enhance the experience any (much as other additions don't enhance the overall effect, in fact).

Blinx 2's greatest achievement is that it's actually not excruciating to play. Gone is the time limit that saw so many temporal tempers frayed; in its place are regular, generous checkpoints, as well as puzzles and levels that feel broken up into neatly demarcated and chewable chunks. Moreover, the lock-on system for aiming and shooting feels improved, even if it can still let you down in a chaotic moment.

But while Artoon has removed the thorns, it still hasn't put in any berries. Despite its sweeping chronological claims, *Blinx 2* still does minimal justice to its core concept. Given the power at the player's fingertips to rewind, pause, fast forward and even record time, the scope for creating some genuinely engaging and ingenious situations is still as immense as it ever was. But, in actuality, everything is blandly obvious and ironically one-dimensional, and the use of the rewind function is still as chrono-illogical as it ever was.

The Tom Tom sections are more enjoyable, thanks to the absence of such an underplayed premise and the presence of dependable, less-boggling thirdperson stealth and shooting action. But there's still nothing here that truly hooks the player in, no situation that feels like anything more complex than it at first appears.

Altogether, this does put it ahead of the original, but leaves it far from being as delightful and appealing as its ideas paint it to be. Two games in, and the potential for something radically and uniquely warped is still as unfulfilled as it was when Blinx was just a mind-bending prospect on a release schedule's horizon. Is there still time to do justice to such a concept? Possibly. But with *Viewtiful Joe* and *Prince Of Persia* already on the case – with less ambition, but proven track records – it's maybe a question of whether there's any space left for such a third-rate time lord. **[5]**

The Vs mode – where up to four players take a team each of pigs or cats into battle – is likeable, but nowhere near as deep as it should be. Only one time power can be used at any given time, preventing them from being layered and bringing something more exciting into the fray

There's some prettiness in *Blinx 2*, but it's mostly present in the Time Sweepers' HQ – an expansive room with a reflective floor and a ghostly clock. Levels are large and move smoothly, but rarely delight

Chrono Crossing



The Tom Tom gang has recourse to space-control powers, which are just a spin on the typical inventory of stealth gadgets on offer. You can dive into sub-space, which allows you to sink into the ground and travel undetected. Decoys and banana skins are self-explanatory, while black holes allow Tom Toms to suck up and dispose of any unwary Time Sweepers on patrol. A stealth cloak is also available, which keeps the player invisible if they're moving slowly enough. As with the Time Sweepers' own quest, the Tom Toms' levels feel far less gripping than you'd expect them to be.



MARIO POWER TENNIS

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEB 25 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: CAMELOT



In Artist On The Court, coloured paint balls, which are launched out of machines, must be aimed at specific locations on the canvas to complete the Nintendo-themed picture

Power moves are like miniature versions of *Final Fantasy VII*'s summoning spells. Fun at first, their animated sequences soon become tiresome to watch, although in this game you can at least switch them off

Tennis is one of sport's simplest, most engrossing and elegant games, and has always lent itself well to the videogame format (some might argue that it even kick-started the industry with *Pong*). So it's distressing to see Camelot doing such a hatchet job all these years later with an overcomplicated and often lame treatment of the beautiful game.

The gulf between this and the ambrosial N64 version couldn't be more marked. Sure, the original had its excesses, the exaggerated serves, curve balls and cast of flamboyant Nintendo characters, but the essence of tennis had been left intact. Though they may have screamed 'fun' from the pages of a design document, Camelot has introduced a number of gimmicks that have only served to dilute the sport's spirit. Those who loved the original will find *Mario Tennis* is a good work spoiled.

Now, every character gets a couple of special power moves, one offensive and one defensive. Find the ball rushing past you at great speed, or just out of reach, and you can trigger your character's power move and recover the situation. But this weakens tactics: so long as you have a power move geared up and ready to launch you can get away with some pretty lackadaisical play.

Matches often become toilsome wars of attrition, especially when you reach the final stages of the harder tournaments. Matters improve a little with human opponents, but the long drawn-out rallies feel like hard work, not tense battles of wit and skill.

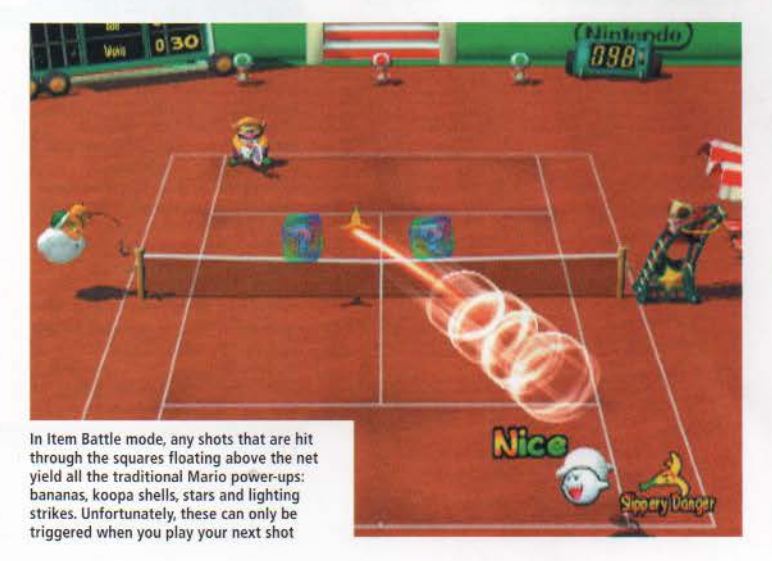
The eccentricity of the main Tournament mode carries over into the Special games and the Exhibition mode's Gimmick courts. There's more room in bonus games for madcap lunacy but, ironically, some of these are pretty dull. Take Gooper Blooper Volley, a game in which you must field 20 shots dished out by the boss from *Super Mario Sunshine*; completion merely ups your work rate to 50 returns, and so on. Or Mecha-Bowser Mayhem, a tedious battle that sees you repeatedly hitting the A button to fire balls into a giant robot mouth.

Power Tennis has depth only in so far as there's a great deal to do – medals to win, records to beat and tournament trophies to hold aloft – but all the frills and gimmicks overcomplicate something that wasn't broken in the first place. There's a game in here, but its novelty value wears off very quickly. 'Absolute tennis lunacy' screams the blurb on the back of the box. It's difficult to disagree with that. **[5]**

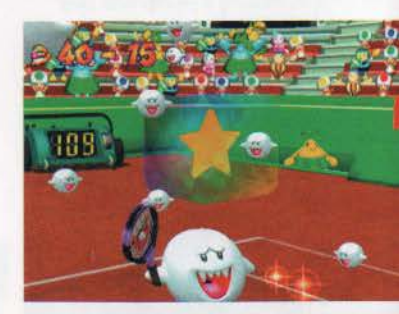
Hoopla



The Ring Shot game returns and is one of the better extras. Each player scores points for hitting shots directly through rings, though smaller hoops glean higher rewards. In a clever twist, the player who loses the game point collects only half of the ring total they've accumulated, with the remainder going over to the winner. The simplicity of this risk/reward element gives it an edge and a strategic nuance missing from some of the more elaborate games.



In Item Battle mode, any shots that are hit through the squares floating above the net yield all the traditional Mario power-ups: bananas, koopa shells, stars and lighting strikes. Unfortunately, these can only be triggered when you play your next shot





Each Gimmick court has a number of extra, and annoying distractions to keep you on your toes. However, whether it's crocodiles snapping at your heels or sludge on the floor, they remain interesting for only a short while



Set in a sky-based world not dissimilar to *Skies Of Arcadia*, *Kaitos* examines the relationships between five floating landmass nations and their disunity under an all-powerful empire. Despite the rich potential of the setting, the scenario is more backdrop than gameplay springboard

BATEN KAITOS: ETERNAL WINGS AND THE LOST OCEAN

FORMAT: GC PRICE: $50 (£26) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: MONOLITH SOFT DEVELOPER: NAMCO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E144

First impressions of *Baten Kaitos* seem jarringly off-key with Namco's creative RPG output of late. Genre conventions you'd hoped had been consigned to history abound: polygonal characters awkwardly float on prerendered backgrounds; a strained fade-to-black transition accompanies all key interactions, reshuffling the various players on to their stage spots; and the pregnant pauses inserted between each spoken sentence provide little relief from the worst vocal cast in recent memory. The first half hour is slow-paced, clichéd and almost indistinguishable from other underachieving Japanese RPGs of the last five years.

Then you enter your first battle and grievances dissipate. This card-battling RPG is a far cry from *Pokémon*'s pedestrianism. Cards screech on to the screen, meaning their selection demands beat 'em up accuracy, unhesitating speed and mathematical awareness in order to parry, counter and combo toward victory. The card element becomes not so much a novelty patchwork as the fundamental groundwork informing every player choice, action and singular brick of gameplay.

Each item in the game, all 1,022 of them, has a card representation (known as Magnus cards), so each staple RPG element is collectable in card form, from battle items such as swords, armour and spells through to photographic representations of every monster you encounter. Every item you discover can be added to your deck by capturing its essence in a blank card and then used in battles with varying effects or to aid progression through puzzles. Catching them all has never been so compulsive.

A limited number of cards (dictated by level) for each character must be selected from your ever-growing stock. Picking the right combination of offensive and defensive components for each character's deck is paramount to success, and this mechanism cleverly puts the success/failure balance back into the player's hands (literally).

In an ingenious twist, inventory items are affected by time, so a healing card such as Ripe Bananas will eventually rot into a distinct offensive poisonous card form. Similarly, a Savings Account card accrues interest over time and can be sold for a hefty profit. Many cards can also be mixed during battles to create entirely new Magnus: sequentially combining an upturned helmet with a bottle of mineral water, some dried rice and a fire spell will produce the powerful healing card Boiled Rice, and much enjoyment is had from successfully second-guessing secret Magnus combinations.

Despite the complexities of the card system, *Baten Kaitos* stays true to type. Every predictable element of epic storytelling is present, from the evil overlord antagonist to the ubiquitous microcosm-through-macrocosm narrative arc.

However, so well integrated is the card collection/reward mechanic that the traditional RPG exploration elements slip in easily between the staccato rhythm of the battles. For this reason, the game takes on an invigorating freshness that overrides most of its generic frustrations. **[7]**

The window of reaction afforded when picking a card with which to defend yourself can often be extremely small. By placing your cursor over a defensive card at the end of your attack turn you can ensure that, when the moment comes, you are prepared to get in that all-important first parry





Baten Kaitos comes from the team behind *Xenosaga* and, while the scope and execution of both games is very different, there are graphical similarities. The prerendered backgrounds are daintily animated, and this movement helps to bring each scene to life



You have the option of seeing a breakdown of all the damage calculations after each attack/defence move. This helps considerably when factoring in the elemental modifiers in each card and demonstrates how important numerical runs can be to high scoring. The down side to all these figures is that they do interrupt the otherwise slick flow of battles

Damage limitation



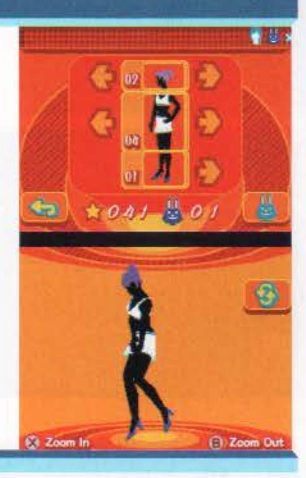
This being a card-based RPG, there's a daunting amount of mathematical damage calculation underpinning battles. Every card is allocated a random number from one to nine. By using cards of the same value in direct succession, or cards in numerical ascending or descending sequence, you can add considerable damage modifiers to your attack or defence moves. Factor in the elemental properties of most cards and creating the most powerful combos from each hand requires seriously quick thinking. You're frequently given only a second to select an appropriate blocking card to fend off an attack; the option of then seeing a breakdown of the damage calculations after each move helps show what does and doesn't work well in any given combat situation.



FEEL THE MAGIC XY/XX

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£15)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)

Unleash the Maniac



Most potentially disturbing is the game's aptly titled Maniac mode, where players can see the fruits of their outfit-unlocking labour, modelled in full rotating and zoomable 3D. Once an outfit is chosen, the two displays can be swapped so the player might, well, manipulate the girl by touching her wherever he might choose. Secret outfits for this mode can be unlocked by playing the game with select Sonic Team GBA titles inserted in the DS's relevant slot. As a result, rejoice, the heretofore impossible is now possible – hardcore Sega fans can dress up a girl as NiGHTS and touch her inappropriately to their hearts' content.

This year's Game Developers Conference included a special Game Designer's Challenge, pitting three top designers against one another to go boldly into uncharted territory and create a game about a love story. Unbeknown to all at the time, though, halfway across the world Sega was hard at work actually doing just that. *Feel The Magic* is a retelling of the timeless boy-meets-girl, boy-joins-troupe-of-rabbit-eared-performance-artists-to-impress-girl tale, told in a pastiche of diverse minigames that have you flexing your kung-fu skills to protect your love interest from a pack of charging bulls one minute and escaping the bowels of a 50-foot serpent the next.

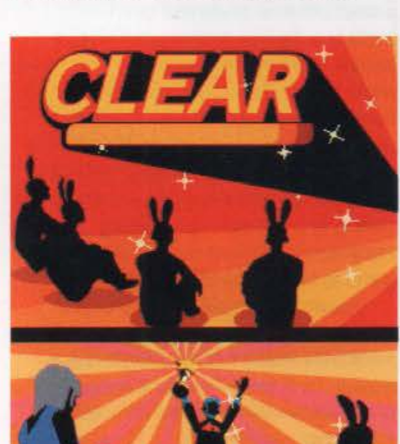
Though the Sonic Team logo is the first thing that appears upon powering up the game, from the title screen onward you'll instantly recognise the influence of the team's newest members, the merged staff of the former UGA. Director Takumi Yoshinaga and designer Taro Hino bring back all of the retro-chic style that made *Space Channel 5* memorable, and the game's limited palette and striking silhouetted character design create one of the most visually arresting titles in recent memory.

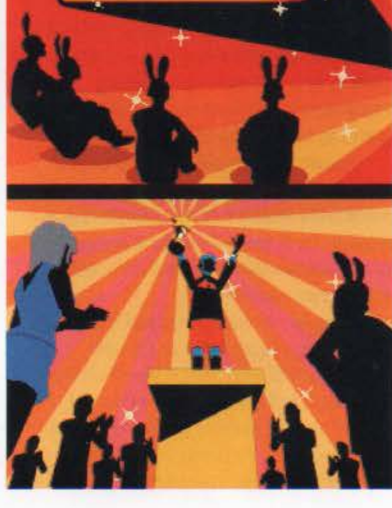
Sonic Team's underlying mission – to create a launch title to demonstrate nearly every feature with which the DS promises to revolutionise portable gaming – is undoubtedly a success. *Feel The Magic*, of all the handful of US launch games, is the best primer for the hardware's capabilities and potential, and will be the title you'll use when introducing the system to your friends.

However, for all its copious charm, it never fully seems to transcend this utilitarian purpose. The subset of games that stay focused on the love story at hand feel the most successful, almost unnervingly so. Using your fingertip to rub the girl clean, or awkwardly fumble with the buttons on her dress so she might slip it off – all while she blushes and coos back in satisfaction – is a truly unparalleled experience. Other minigames, though, feel slapdash and awkwardly out of context. Sometimes a tech demo truly is just a tech demo, no matter how skimpily you dress it, even if it is as genuinely mesmerising as blowing on the screen to send a sailing boat out to sea.

The minigames completed in Story mode can be played on their own, most at an increasing rate of difficulty. Clearing these earns stars, which, in conjunction with rabbit tokens hidden in story mode cut-scenes, unlock new outfits for the girl. These extenders, unfortunately, can't ultimately save *Feel The Magic* from its own brevity. It's doubtful you'll endlessly return past the few hours necessary to beat the game, but for now it remains both a welcome introduction to a new system and its own unique and rewarding experience.

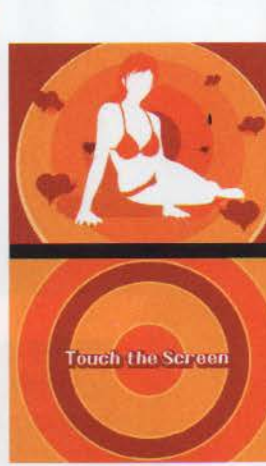
[6]





Feel The Magic, internally known as Project RUB, plays like one big Japanese pun, from 'rub', as the method of screen manipulation, to its Japanese synonym and the game's main theme of love (ra-bu), and from the repeated spoken command 'rub it!' to 'rabbit' – the outfits donned by the performance art troupe





In a nod toward Sega's own *Typing Of The Dead*, one of *Feel The Magic*'s minigames pits players against their own number pad skills as they desperately punch in strings of digits on the touchscreen before paratroopers above drop to their doom



An example of the game's more contextless content, this minigame features a giant candle breaking through a dimensional rift in the space-time continuum, which the player must then attempt to blow out as it marches ever closer. It's certainly wacky, but rather awkwardly placed





DAIGASSO! BAND BROTHERS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

People who say games can't 'do' complex emotions haven't played this. Ten minutes in, you'll be overwhelmed by the sharp ache of loneliness. Find some friends, and within another ten you'll be glowing with shy pride and boosted confidence. *Band Brothers* is what cooperative games always promise and rarely deliver.

On the surface, it's a rhythm-action game, but it practice it operates more like an adaptor, turning your DS from gaming machine into rudimentary musical instrument. It may only have three keys (the D-pad, the action button and the screen), but melody and variation will be added to the simple patterns you tap out. Alone, this is a fairly empty experience. Few tunes offer any lasting challenge, and the MIDI-like whine of the instrumentation will remind you of horrendous amateur fan-sites. Also, although there's a strange mix of music – from Vivaldi to Deep Purple, Joplin to *StarFox* – rather too much of it is made up of simpering J-pop.

However, this was never meant to be a singleplayer game. Taking advantage of the DS's ability to beam software to other units, one copy of *Band Brothers* can colonise seven other DSs, forming an instant orchestra. Although rhythm-action games over the years have dabbled with beat-matching and mixing, this is the first to concentrate purely on the joys of harmony. Catching the eye of a player with whom you've just nailed a perfect duet is a sweet triumph. The best headshot rarely felt this good.

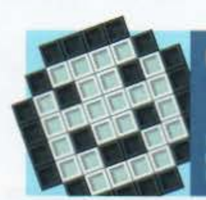
In many respects, this is as big a step back as games have ever taken. A century ago people with a shared musical heritage could gather together and make music. Back then it was folk songs and hymns; now it's the *Zelda* theme and that tune you get when call centres put you on hold. It's an odd state of affairs – cutting-edge technology doing something you could accomplish with a penny whistle – but one of which it's impossible not to approve. **[7]**



The presentation of *Band Brothers* is as startling as it is beautiful. The manual comes not as a plain booklet, but as three individual posters



Beaming the game to other DSs is a rather slow process, but once done you can swap songs and instruments freely



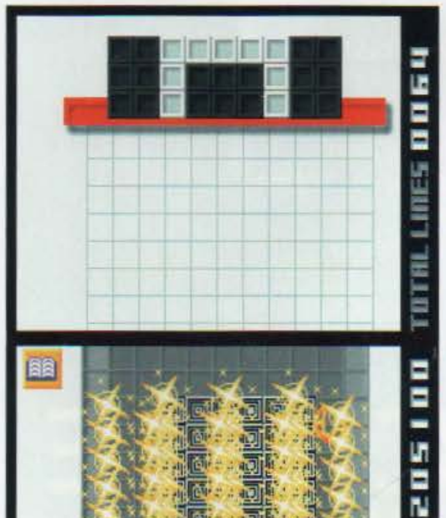
CHOKKAN HITOFUDE

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥3,800 (£19)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

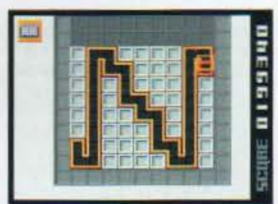
The pitch is simple: this is the DS's *Tetris*. The reality is as straightforward: this isn't the DS's *Tetris*. *Chokkan Hitofude* – or *One Line Puzzle* as it's often referred to in English – has a very simple premise. Use the stylus, without lifting it from the screen, to flip black panels to white and vice versa until they match up. This basic idea forms the entirety of the gameplay for the title's four modes. Challenge sets you the task of clearing a tower of blocks before they reach the top and trigger game over. The *Tetris* overtones are clear, but as a game it's actually closer to an upside-down *Mr Driller*. Checkmate mode sets you a hundred puzzle screens, where you're free to headscratch and experiment for as long as you need. Edit lets you create your own Checkmate puzzles, and the versus mode allows play against another owner of the game, where each line you clear from your screen is slotted into theirs.

Such clarity of design is the obvious reason for the *Tetris* analogies, but *Chokkan Hitofude* has none of *Tetris*' empty accessibility. It takes a while to adjust to its foibles, and tracing out the long, intricate lines needed to tackle later levels takes skill and precision when under pressure. It's also a game of many more hidden subtleties than *Tetris*; learning how to best use the empty gutter which runs round the grid and conquering your initial instinct to aim for all white or all black rather than a patchwork of matching lines takes more time than *Tetris* ever asked of newcomers.

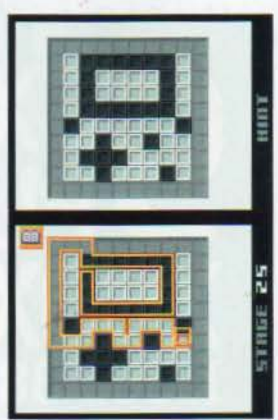
It is, however, a decidedly elegant game. The puzzle mode acts as a perfect trainer for the marathon undertaking of the main challenge mode, where 1,000 increasingly scrambled lines await unblinking players. The presentation and sound effects perfectly complement the austerity of the gameplay, but the end result is a rather cold and uninvolving game. Too subtle to be a *Tetris* replacement, too plain to be an engaging puzzler, *Chokkan Hitofude* adds up to something a little greyer than its crisp black-and-white stylings might suggest. **[7]**



In Challenge mode, the more lines you clear at once, the more you score. It's crucial to keep an eye on the top screen so you can see what's coming and plan your monochrome moves well in advance. Hooking up a perfect nine-line block feels fantastic



The bright yellow outline makes it clear which panels will flip colour. If you make a mistake you can retrace your steps or cancel the whole line







ALIEN HOMINID

FORMAT: GC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: $30 (£15)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), Q1 2005 (UK)
PUBLISHER: O-3 ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: THE BEHEMOTH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E141

It's next to impossible these days to encounter talk of a game like *Alien Hominid* that isn't a knee-jerk lament of the impending extinction of the shooter in particular and 2D gaming in general. In many cases, this lazy nostalgia is misplaced, but it's precisely when a game like *Alien Hominid* comes along that the position becomes immediately understandable and defensible. The Behemoth obviously feels it, too. The developer understands and is here to salve the wounds that the ageing, cranky old guard have been licking for too long. Not only that, but it believes in the cause so much to have funded development out of its own pocket.

Hominid plays like a love song to days gone by, a mish-mash of shout-outs to all those that came before it – *Contra*, *MegaMan*, *Gunstar Heroes*, and most obviously *Metal Slug* – like a hazy fading memory of how things used to be, reimagined and writ large in gorgeously wild hand-drawn and animated strokes.

The game is hard, mercilessly and sadistically so at times, but maintains such a consistent mood of wanton and gleeful violent chaos that any frustration seems not only acceptable, but almost preferable. The flying missions in particular start off slowly and allow you to settle into the controls, but masterfully build to a fever pitch as the level draws to a close. For the beginners and the overwhelmed, the game can be resumed at any previously visited level,



Alien Hominid's mid-level and end bosses are all gargantuan, elaborately animated and, like nearly everything in the game, usually quite funny. Here, the Soviet mech character prepares to unleash his deadliest attack: using his hammer to drive down his sickle into the player

and four different difficulty settings are available at any time, which increase the number of lives, shot strength, and the availability and strength of personal shields.

The 16 levels of the main game offer a wide variety of play – standard ground combat, a number of mountable vehicles, free-roaming space combat and even a pinch of memory puzzle – and support up to two players. The game also offers minigames for up to four players, including an 8bit-era throwback action-puzzle game with 200 levels and a fully featured editor to create your own.

A few rare show-stopping bugs mar the gleam of this otherwise polished game, but *Alien Hominid* is just about an essential title for anyone who's caught themselves yearning for a forgotten past, or to any young blood wondering exactly what people mean when they say they don't make them like they used to. **[7]**

Another example of the game's variety, the highway level sees the Alien jumping from car to car, commandeering them until they have either duly served his purpose or until they explode, at which point he moves to the next in line behind him







CRASH 'N' BURN

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: CLIMAX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E142



Crash 'n' Burn features online play for up to 16 players on both PS2 and Xbox. Regardless of the number of players involved in a race, however, there will always be 16 cars on track to keep the vehicular violence at its utmost

Virtually all modern-day driving games – no matter how unrealistic – come with a warning. 'Do not attempt to recreate these manoeuvres' is the general gist of them all, possibly to dissuade anyone out there who thinks that *Outrun 2*'s Heart Attack mode is a great idea for a first date. But with a certain sub-section of driving games becoming increasingly focused on playful, emergent destruction – *FlatOut*, *Burnout 3* and now *Crash 'n' Burn* – it's perhaps time for a whole new warning: 'Danger! Dedicated application of skill does not guarantee victory. May lead to high blood pressure if consumed excessively'.

Crash 'n' Burn's tracks are simple affairs, made up of basic loops and criss-cross junctions. But these are just a stage for a furious level of destruction; despite their functional and garish appearance, each of the 16 cars on the track houses plenty of metal guts to be spilled. As they're rammed and mangled, each vehicle bleeds a slick of oil that can be ignited by sparks or the use of nitro, slashing the track with perilous walls of flame. There's nothing glamorous about *Crash 'n' Burn*, but the amount of on-track detritus that builds up is an impressive sight nevertheless.

And you'll have to aim for first place, too, as the game's too-harsh criteria for progression demands it. This intimidating difficulty is softened somewhat by the fact that each race reaps experience (and new shop items) as well as cash for upgrades, but it's little comfort for the fact that a hard-fought, embittered battle to get to second place means you're not allowed to head further into the game.

There's nothing big or clever in *Crash 'n' Burn*, just smooth, focused carnage with suitably loose controls. The fact that two races are never the same, as hazards and burned-out vehicles litter the track in real time, means that the ensuing fray is the pleasure/pain principle writ large. There's just no accounting for an excruciating wipeout on the final lap when such possibilities are at the mercy of circumstances as much as they are at the player's skill. But, played with a graceful, Zen-like acceptance – shit happens – *Crash 'n' Burn* is as enjoyable as it is easy to understand. **[7]**



Tuning is slick and straightforward. Upgrades are purchased and meted out by the player on your vehicle's engine, gearbox and tyres, with the remaining welt of options limited to giving your car some tuner make-up, such as vinyl decals


Dreamcast



TIME EXTEND

SHENMUE

FORMAT: **DREAMCAST**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (AM2)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **29/12/1999**

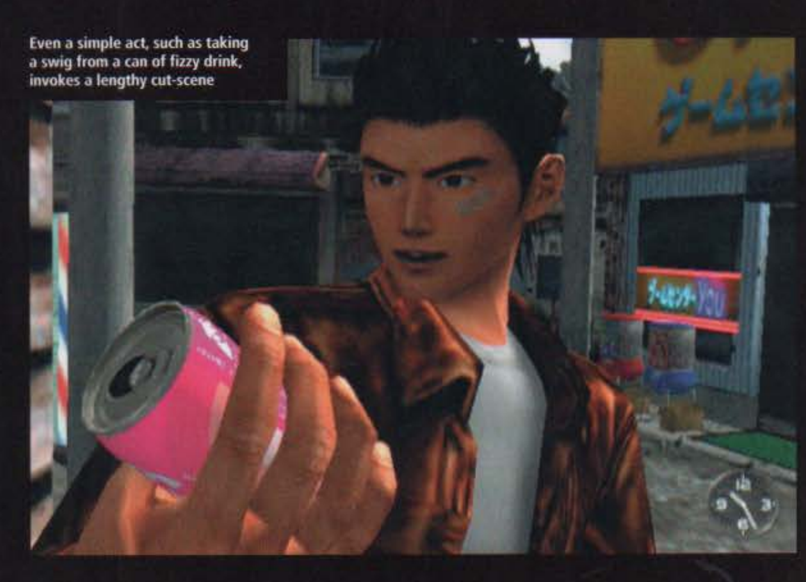
Punctuality , patience, politeness and no guns? Where's the adventure? In Shenmue, of course

Do you remember where you were at 4pm on November 29, 1986? *That* day? The day of the incident? The day the rain turned to snow? Dreamcast owners know where they were – sat hypnotised as they saw Ryo Hazuki watch his father crushed at the hands of a scar-faced intruder. Lan Di – that was his name. The Phoenix Mirror – that was what he wanted, so much so as to murder one of Ryo's family in front of him.

And so it began. It was supposed to be the game to end all games, the grandest, livingest, breathingest world yet created. The hype had painted something that was ambitious and detailed on an unprecedented level for a console game, but the truth behind the finished article was something a little more sobering, as *Shenmue*'s world was as toxic as it was intoxicating. Nobody had any true idea of what to expect, as the swells of preview footage had depicted a game too fat to sum up as a snappy genre recipe. Some resorted to listing the wealth of details, possibilities and distractions instead: 'We're not sure what it is yet, but trust us – it's brilliant'. And everyone did trust *Shenmue*, and Sega, as they revelled in the generous charity and delivered promises of Dreamcast's firstparty software – games that glowed and wowed and seemed too good to be true. *Shenmue*, as with too many Dreamcast games, felt like a present, a gift from an avuncular Sega, refreshing gamers through a seemingly naïve belief that, if it invested heavily in its ideas and its audience, then a profitable framework would somehow come good from this gaming love-in. And the resultant videogame did indeed confound expectations – by being as limited as it was ambitious and as woolly as it was detailed.

The turn-offs are many, as it appears to be iconoclastic in the worst possible way. Virtually nothing can be interacted with. It plods along at its own insular, peculiar pace

Shenmue is, by many yardsticks, an atrocious game. The turn-offs are many, as it appears to be iconoclastic in the worst possible way. Virtually nothing can be interacted with. It plods along at its own insular, peculiar pace. The people around you are

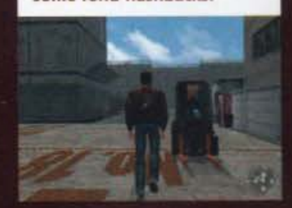


Even a simple act, such as taking a swig from a can of fizzy drink, invokes a lengthy cut-scene



THE DAY JOB

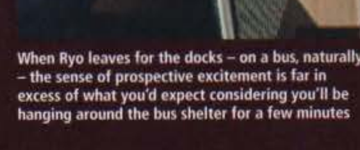
No mention of *Shenmue* is complete without a look at the forklift section, as characteristically despised as it is loved. A fitting metaphor for *Shenmue*'s work ethic, the forklift is an integral part of Ryo's time spent at the local harbour, where he gets a job as a worker just to get closer to the Mad Angels gang and their smuggling activities. Undercover, Ryo has to put the hours in, spending each morning transporting crates from dock to hangar in a fully operable forklift truck. Anyone familiar with *GTA: San Andreas*' Robbing Uncle Sam mission will probably be on the receiving end of some fond flashbacks.



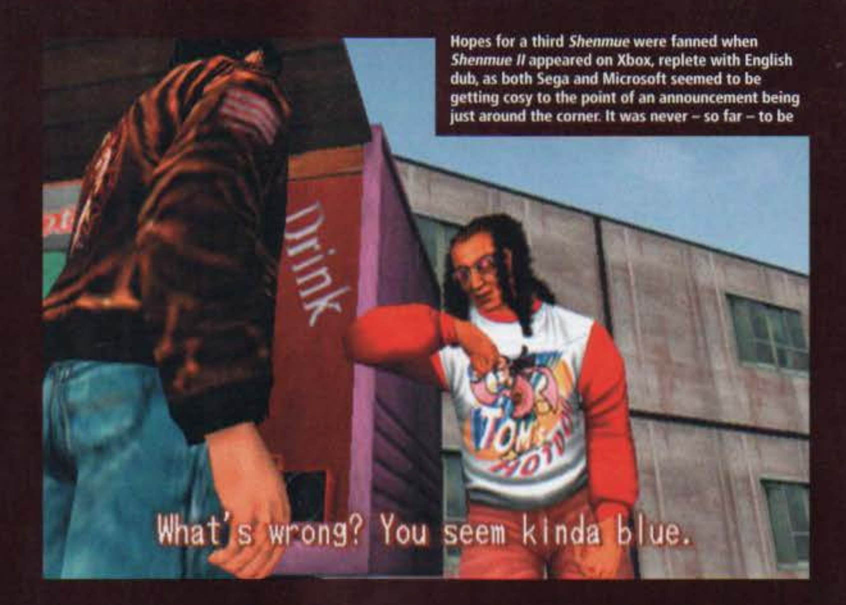
nothing but glorified Post-It notes, pointing the way to the next unskippable cut-scene. The only twitch you feel is the one in your thumb as you struggle to guide the dim Ryo Hazuki around his hazy, vacuous world with the D-pad. Sidequests that are limited to unsubtle collection chores, dropped-in retro arcade machine classics or one of the lamest virtual pets ever created, in the form of a box-bound kitten. It's hard to recommend *Shenmue* to someone who hasn't already played it, who didn't stumble into it, drunk on a mixture of curiosity and Dreamcast fervour, when it was first released. But here's the thing: as poor a torchbearer as it may be for videogames, it's still a testament to their power. Despite all of the heinous crimes counted above, *Shenmue* still manages to coax deep spurts of emotion from those who experienced it fully.

And here's how it does it: luxury, heart and the best of intentions. Now, these descriptions are admittedly guffy in the context of judging a videogame's qualities. But they are there, as real to you as *Shenmue*'s world is when you step out of the Hazuki residence for the first time and into the tenements of Sakuragoaka or the relative bustle of Dobuita.





When Ryo leaves for the docks – on a bus, naturally – the sense of prospective excitement is far in excess of what you'd expect considering you'll be hanging around the bus shelter for a few minutes



Hopes for a third *Shenmue* were fanned when *Shenmue II* appeared on Xbox, replete with English dub, as both Sega and Microsoft seemed to be getting cosy to the point of an announcement being just around the corner. It was never – so far – to be

Luxury? Even today, some of *Shenmue*'s more accomplished visual aspects stand up well when measured against the average videogame. Individual facial detail was astonishing – down to deep wrinkles and emotive expressions – lending a strong visual personality to the community Ryo existed within. This was domesticity and society rendered in the strong, rich colours Sega's console was so effortlessly capable of. There are the big details: everyone popping open an umbrella when it begins to rain, or mopeds weaving carefully through the back streets as folk return home. And there are the little details: the red LCD detail on a butcher's till, or the price list outside the barber's shop featuring makeshift stickers slapped over old prices. It allows players to embark on a voyage of head-turning tourism – strolling with the D-pad and gazing around with the analogue stick – that standard thirdperson movement schemes just don't allow.

Heart? Despite the generic revenge plot, *Shenmue*'s remit is compelling, starting the player out not with a pistol and a hub world, but just a single piece of evidence with which to track down Lan Di. He can't double-jump or combo his way through the situation, but starts out by interrupting people and gathering testimony. And those seemingly unnecessary pauses during conversation – as the person involved stopped what they were doing and turned to face Ryo – were as much a necessary part of reinforcing the sensation of dealing with actual humans, and not just text-prompt vending machines. Despite the abundance of seemingly extraneous detail, *Shenmue*'s world isn't cosmetic just because it can't be interacted with. And despite featuring the most ponderous, glacial sense of progression around, this queer pacing allows the game to seep into your soul in a way that few other games – as they rush to ply you with set-piece excitement and noisy distractions – seem to manage, or want to offer. Cut-scenes may be unskippable, but these aren't just slices of story progression to bookend the player's actions; they are as much a part of the game's drip-feed of events and character and location as anything else, as important to the flow of the story as anything the player directs with their own actions. This is a game that tried in many ways – and failed in plenty – to give the player something unique to experience, a world that they'd happen to find themselves in, not a world created for them to be the potent demigod of.

And, finally, the best of intentions? *Shenmue* stinks of money and man-hours, of investment and ideals. It's hard not to take an interest in its sidetracked glory. Just what had Yu Suzuki and his team invested all this effort for? Was it all just a manifestation of ego, a software puff-piece from someone given too much creative freedom? *Shenmue* certainly feels a little like that, like a lofty, overreaching conception that was innocently allowed to flourish, hamstrung into something limited and restricting when the reality of having to produce an actual, finished videogame had set in.

> **Just what had Yu Suzuki and his team invested all this effort for? Was it all just a manifestation of ego, a puff-piece from someone given too much creative freedom?**

Sega tried to communicate something truly epic through lavishness as much as the intricacy of the story, and it came through in a garbled code that took effort to decipher. But if you manage to make that connection, manage to suspend enough disbelief to be able to unearth all that good intention, then the reward is a magical and unprecedented one. It's a quest with just one single objective – to avenge your father's death – but one that still hasn't been ticked off the list, despite the appearance of a sequel. In fact, for all of the detective work and investigating that the player has to do, Ryo's actual accomplishments are few; he discovers that Lan Di is in Hong Kong, and so he goes there. It's just one A-to-B quest stretched out over several square kilometres and hundreds of specific people, an antidote to the typical facelessness of NPC gatherings.

Rarely has anything aped life – actual, real life, not physically, but socially – as closely as this. Despite the strong local flavour of Japanese culture, any western gamer can identify with Ryo's community – gangs of playful kids and rude schoolchildren, doddering old folk and busy gossips. Someone mending a bike, or keeping their garden tidy.



ABOUT FACE

Shenmue's standard packaging felt like a special edition, the thick box necessary to contain all four discs of the game's girth. Only three of those discs contained the game – the fourth being the mysterious Passport GD-ROM. Essentially, this was the *Shenmue* equivalent of the 'extras' option that occurs in pretty much every modern game: a chance to view the pivotal cut-scenes as well as a music suite. More interesting, however, was the tutorial option, a museum of talking heads where major characters would explain how the game works while the player panned the camera around their faces, soaking up a magnificent visual diversion. Your control of an independent light source during these viewings just seemed to be Sega showing off. These images, while not best suited to emoting the dub of English dialogue, remain impressive today.



Capsule collection is simple, expensive (they cost a fifth of Ryo's allowance) and random, but is no less addictive for it. Complete sets reap rewards if you use a completed save to begin *Shenmue II*



FREE TO A GOOD HOME

Squeezing one of the triggers in *Shenmue* takes you into a firstperson viewpoint, allowing Ryo to scan the locality. His gaze fixes on to and zooms into anything of interest. It's not revolutionary as such, but was pitched as being so, and even has its own long-winded acronym – FREE, or Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment. Overblown jargon aside, this function makes initial explorations of the Hazuki residence – the most interactive environment in the game – seem almost misleading compared to how little use the rubbernecking option is throughout the rest of the game. Drawers and cupboards can be opened, leading to photographs, batteries and even music cassettes being collected. The Hazuki living room is host to an anachronistic Saturn console, upon which certain classic Sega games can be played if you manage to win copies of them in a lottery.

Drunks weaving their way home as the night draws in. The appearance of an unconvincing Santa Claus strolling the streets as Christmas draws near.

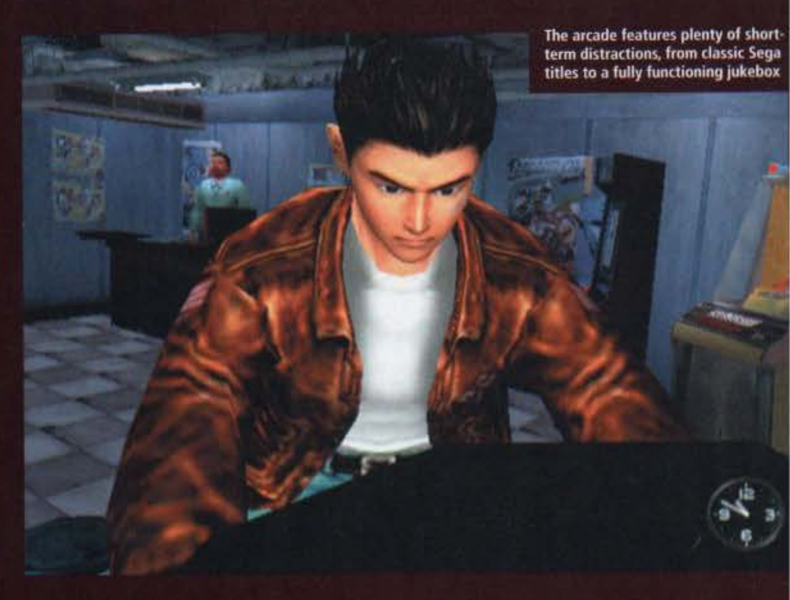
For anyone who took the hook and followed the obvious, prompted trail of breadcrumbs, it's an incredible journey. The fact that you aren't allowed to explore and experiment slowly melts away as you're drawn into the onerous and compelling task weighing on Ryo's shoulders. The clock ticking away in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen only added to that hasty pressure.

And so on to the time itself. More than just *GTA* with a bedtime, *Shenmue*'s diurnal cycle is laden with slight, slow tension. Each day has a specific date. Every day that elapses brings with it the leaden sensation that the trail leading to Lan Di could well be cooling into obscurity. As soon as the player finds a way to goof around, a quick glance at the watch – shops shut at 18:00, and it's best to be home before 20:00 lest doting family housekeeper Ine became worried – soon brings them back into line with Ryo's own consummate seriousness.

Ryo Hazuki. Not so much a blank canvas as a dull paving slab of a man-boy. He's unattractive gaming white space, a naïve, patronising and boring dipstick, a Luigi without a Mario, but in terms of gaming feng shui he doesn't upset the flow of energy, and in fact even encourages it. Ryo's monotone delivery and well-meaning verbal tics became



Shenmue's looks are typical of the striking, clean colours the Dreamcast was so capable of producing. Evening drawing in is as effective as *San Andreas*' own sunset



The arcade features plenty of short-term distractions, from classic Sega titles to a fully functioning jukebox

unintentional catchphrases: "I see," "Excuse me," and the legendary "I'm looking for some sailors." Character becomes caricature, but it doesn't clash with *Shenmue*'s world, whose inhabitants are as poorly voiced as Ryo himself. The sheer quantity of dialogue feels like another welcome luxury, but led to the game's morose gravity being undercut – or, for some, enhanced – somewhat by this camp and clumsy American delivery. It's a fact that makes the Dreamcast sequel – which features the original Asian voice acting with subtitles – feel

That was Shenmue's achievement – making players push buttons and care about their efforts through gentle emotional power, rather than through imminent death or glory

foreign, weird and un-*Shenmue* in terms of more than just dialect.

No characters are any less memorable for it, however. Rastafarian Tom, hot dog vendor and rubbish dancer, has an accent that wobbles hilariously between Jamaican, Russian and Scottish. But instead of simply being dire voice acting, it soon becomes something far more significant than that – it becomes Tom's own voice, as recognisable and individual as the dreads that splash around his shoulders like the tendrils of a hairy jellyfish. If this was a more common videogame character, a war general, say, his patois would be at excruciating odds with whatever dramatic, rousing debrief he was trying to expound upon. However, this is just Tom. He runs the hot dog stand. He has no role to fill but his own, such is the luxury of a world filled with people and not just plot-friendly archetypes.

If we're going to mention Tom, then of course we can't help but mention Nozomi. *Shenmue*'s side-story of fledgling romance is perhaps one of the most simultaneously touching and frustrating relationships around. It features none of *Ico*'s prolonged, physical consummation, and none of the bawdy, tactless flirting befitting of a gaming hero. It is, if anything, a match made in heaven, as two awkward, well-mannered non-entities somehow manage to tiptoe politely around each other's feelings while slowly falling for one another. So much so that the bike scene in the latter stages of the game – with Nozomi nuzzling lovingly into the back of Ryo's leather jacket – seems like some gratuitous, first-base climax.

When loyal friend and ally Fuku hands his life savings over to Ryo, or when the harbour tramp reveals himself to be a powerful martial artist these moments are as delightful as any hidden bonus stage, as shocking as any plot twist. That was *Shenmue*'s achievement – making players push buttons and care about their efforts through gentle emotional power, rather than through imminent death or glory. Ryo's final departure from the Hazuki residence is a gripping finale, as much because of significance as invested effort.

And if the voice acting falters any, there's one area of audio design where the game doesn't – its epic soundtrack. Containing an unmistakably eastern flavour in its orchestral arrangements, it manages to remain unnerving without ever becoming overly moody and downbeat, always pointing towards something dark and mystical tucked



The sense of mystery was perpetuated neatly by Ryo's occasional, enigmatic dreams, featuring a mystifying female and many other shadowy prospects. A taste of things to come? Pretty much, yes

away behind this down-to-earth, civilised suburban hoi polloi, waiting to be unearthed. And that's exactly how it feels when you find the secret Hazuki dojo basement, or first clap eyes on Chai, *Shenmue*'s own terrifying, demented Gollum.

Since its 2000 UK release, *Shenmue* has been called many things by those who've grown to love and savour it. A clockwork oil painting. A travelogue from a virtual resort. These are nearly gibberish, of course, but then again so is *Shenmue* as a videogame. It is, ultimately, a world you can wallow in, if not play with. It's a game that ends with more possibilities than it begins with, and despite two chapters of Ryo's story having been written, the book remains as open as it ever was. Lan Di remains as villainous, hateful and unpunished as he was on *that* day, the day the rain turned to snow.

The *Shenmue* saga is probably one of the greatest hangnails for followers of unfinished videogame business, thanks to the series being artificially curtailed after just two games. But, due to this (so far) unhappy ending, something far more powerful than expected has happened. The hungry wish for *Shenmue 3* to appear has become more than just a typical internet-petition clarion call for extending a series that's managed to foster a cache of hardcore kudos. It's a call for Lan Di to finally be brought to justice. When emotion in games is as touchy a subject as it is rarely touched upon, *Shenmue*'s emotional power has achieved something that few other games manage: it has taken on a life of its own.



EVENTS COORDINATOR

Despite *Shenmue*'s gentle, gradual nature of play, it still featured more typical videogame functions in order to forward its more violent and fast-moving sections. Perhaps explaining away *Shenmue*'s early codename of *Virtua Fighter RPG* (aka Project Berkley), there's a wealth of fighting techniques that can be learned, far more than are necessary to get Ryo through the game. Scraps seem chaotic to begin with, thanks to multiple opponents, but getting a handle of the basics is enough to leave you in control. Numerous large, empty spaces in the game – such as a local car park – permit Ryo to train, with each successful use of a technique increasing his mastery of it. QTEs (Quick Time Events) are also rife, where button and D-pad combinations flicker on the screen for a heartbeat, needing to be pressed swiftly in order to make Ryo perform whatever quick-thinking task is needed to progress the scene.





Ryo's notebook is used to store pertinent information, but feels flimsy thanks to the fact that only certain preconceived tidbits can be stored in it, and each has its place. Huge gaps can appear in your notes, leaving entire pages worryingly empty, if Ryo doesn't talk to the right person at the right time


SUBARU
Codemasters
3
PIRELLI
Hella
PIRELLI



THE MAKING OF...
COLIN MCRAE RALLY

WaveRace 64, Michael Schumacher and the hardcore fans who can't let go. This is the story of CMR, the first of the new breed of console rally games

FORMAT: **PLAYSTATION** PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1998**



Sure, a new rally game nowadays is more likely to raise the shoulders of a gamer than a follicle on their eyebrow, but it wasn't always like that. Many people forget that there was a time when this subgenre was as empty as the countryside WRC drivers typically roar through at around 100mph. *Sega Rally Championship*, back in 1995, had wowed the gaming crowds in arcades (and subsequently in the living rooms) with one of the most accessible, most rewarding handling models our pastime has seen. Nine years on, and it has lost little of its attraction.

And it's little surprise to find it played an instrumental part in *Colin McRae Rally's* creation. "The basic premise for the game was based around the car handling in *Sega Rally*," confirms **Guy Wilday**, producer of the first four *CMR* games. "Everyone who played it loved the way the cars behaved on the different surfaces, especially the fact that you could slide the car realistically on the loose gravel. The car handling remains excellent to this day and it's still an arcade machine I enjoy playing given the chance."

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Still, as fine and enduring as it is, AM3's creation wasn't the only



Racing the clock (hence virtual adversaries) was a masterstroke. Rather than make it soulless, it defined the *McRae* experience – responsive yet intuitive handling will always result in a hugely rewarding drive



During crashes car models tended to display dynamics that were perhaps a little too rigid, although visible damage proved a great touch

inspiration. "On reflection, the key games which have influenced the design of *CMR* all share a common theme – in each case the physics and control system are fundamental to their enjoyment," says Wilday, before quoting *Screamer Rally* on PC as another exponent of excellent yet controllable car dynamics. And, wisely, the team cast its influence beyond the four-wheeled realm: "*WaveRace* for the N64 is a fine example of a game with realistic physics and an incredibly well balanced control system. The game is easy to pick up and play but it is only after playing it for some time that you start to understand the additional nuances of the controls. Initially it is just about going left or right, but later you start to use the weight of the rider to fine-tune the movement of the jetski in the corners and over the waves. I loved the fact that this game was easily accessible but had that greater depth for more hardcore players – this was a key design goal for *CMR*."

Back on land, and with the basic high-level concept for the game in place, the next few weeks were spent designing the game around this essential premise. Wilday remembers those days with legitimate fondness: "When I started [at Codemasters] it was a much smaller company with probably 50 or 60 people in total, so it still had very much the feel of a family business. For most of the people at the company – including myself – it was their first job in the videogame industry so there was an enormous amount of excitement, enthusiasm and energy. It was a really creative environment and there was a real drive to experiment and to push the boundaries."

This is evident in the team's first creation. Realising there would be little point in emulating Sega's achievement, the Codemasters crew had another clear objective in addition to an accessible yet advanced driving model, as Wilday explains: "[*Sega Rally*] had obviously chosen to adopt an arcade approach. The real sport was very different and it was felt there was an opportunity to create a game









For the truly dedicated, only the in-car view was acceptable (four other cams also featured: two chase, one bonnet and one bumper). In this mode, the level of immersion was – indeed, remains – unparalleled

based more closely around the real rally formulae." Time would eventually reveal just how vital a principle this would turn out to be. While the handful of other rally games of the period (such as Infogrames' *V-Rally*) bastardised the fundamentals of the sport, forcing them into a generic videogame racing blueprint (notably by introducing CPU competition into the stages), *CMR* bravely refused to deviate from its primary inspiration. This was going to be about one car, one track, one clock.

The fist part of the game to be implemented was its essential core, which in this particular case meant getting a car running down a single stage. This gave the team the opportunity to test all the key areas of the game, including the vehicle mechanics and the new format – for a console rally title – of a single car



Replays did their best to keep up with the leader of the time, *Gran Turismo*, but never overtook it. Still, most of the angles were often suitably dramatic

racing against the clock. "I remember there being some nervousness within the team and the company about whether this idea was going to work. The real sport was competitive and challenging so I felt sure that it could be incorporated into a game," reveals Wilday. There was, he admits, a gradual process of 'buy-in' to the idea. But then, impromptu competitions started up in some of the team rooms. "Someone would set a time on one of the development stages and then everyone else would try to beat it. The hook was there. Everyone gradually bought into the concept and from that point on we knew we had the heart of the game and so moved into full development."

As ever, this is easier said than done, particularly as this was the team's first PlayStation venture (and in many cases, in videogame making). Understanding the benefits and limitations of Sony's 32bit machine while simultaneously developing the game became crucial to implementing a realistic behaviour and aesthetic. "The mechanics were limited by the amount of CPU time we could spare and the textures by the amount of video memory – and therefore resolution – that we could use," Wilday recalls. "It was a real balancing act to get all of the features we wanted working in harmony so that we had the look and playability we


Colin McRae Rally is proof truly great driving games never age. Arguably, it plays better than recent CMRs

were happy with. We aimed high and tried to work out how to implement our ideas as opposed to working from what was already proven possible.

"The biggest problems I remember were with the rally stages. We had decided that we wanted a wide range of countries and a good number of stages within each. Every stage needed to be loaded into memory and as we continued to push both the length and detail of the tracks we had problems with some of the stages failing to load due to size. We then had the difficult problem of downscaling these tracks without noticeably reducing their quality or visual look within its specific country. I remember going though this process a number of times during the development of the game, and it was never easy."

For their considerable efforts, Wilday and his team were rewarded with both critical (including a 9/10 review way back in **E**61) and commercial success. But arguably more important than creating a great game was creating a great rally game. "Many of the really hardcore fans I have spoken to still seem to think that the original *CMR* is still the best, which surprises me," admits Wilday. "They feel that the car handling is more playable than in any of the other versions."

Certainly, the handling remains the game's strongest asset, and for Wilday it represents *CMR*'s cornerstone, a delicate balance between realism and accessibility as well as being a key factor in the game's popularity: "It was important that people could pick the game up, play it and enjoy it immediately, but at the same time we wanted to provide growth for the more experienced player to be able to find special nuances in the behaviour of the car. We wanted the player to feel that they were driving a real rally car but at the same time we were very much aware that we wanted an enjoyable game and not a hardcore driving simulation."

Interestingly, the other element Wilday is hugely proud of is the mud splattering effect on cars: "We had this idea very late in the development of the game, and it would never have made it for the original planned release [date]. There were many discussions about what we should do, and it was decided that it was an important feature to include and also gave us some more time to spend playtesting the game. It was finally implemented in a quarter of the estimated time and as far as I am aware was the first game to include this feature. For me, it is small details like this that add to the whole immersive experience of the game and I feel sure that in some small way it added to its success."

And you know you've accomplished your goal as a racing game designer when your creation manages to enthral the world's most successful racing driver. At the start of development for *Colin McRae Rally 2.0*, one of Ford's mechanics regaled Wilday with an anecdote concerning a Marlboro corporate entertainment truck that travels around the various company-sponsored events promoting the brand. Due to the tobacco firm's involvement with Mitsubishi and Ferrari, the truck was often present at WRC and F1 events, and its hospitality suite then housed a PlayStation with a number of racing games, including *Colin McRae Rally*. After a WRC event, goes the tale, a number of crew members were invited to relax in the truck, and after spending some time trading stage times on *CMR* they noticed a familiar name at the top of every stage hi-score table. It was that of one M Schumacher, who had allegedly been playing the game at a previous Grand Prix weekend.

"I have no idea if this is true and no way of verifying it but I still think it's cool anyway," Wilday says, with an understandable – and absolutely deserved – sense of satisfaction.

"We wanted to provide growth for the more experienced player to be able to find special nuances in the behaviour of the car"

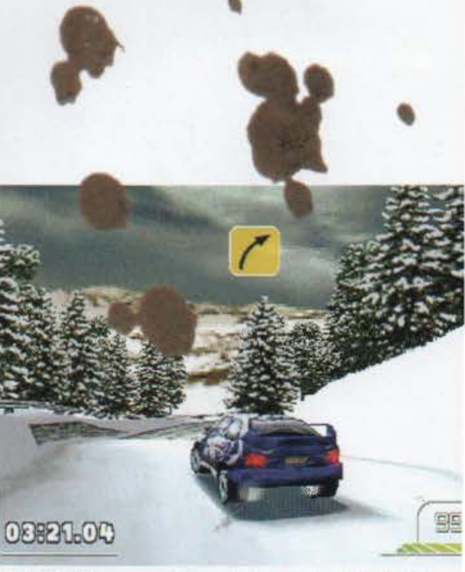

Setting up the car proved crucial. Unintentional off-road excursions on stages were paid for in more than cosmetic damage – repairs carried out had to be performed within the allocated time (top)



WHY COLIN?

For Wilday, the choice of rally driver to front his game was always obvious: "Colin McRae is an enormously inspirational individual for fans of motorsport. Anyone who has watched or experienced motorsport at this level knows that to do what these guys do you have to switch off all of your instincts for self-preservation. You have to push yourself and your vehicle to the limit of traction – and safety – with the aim of winning the event or crashing out in the attempt. Colin is one of the rare breed of drivers who will always give 100 per cent, and it is for this that he has such a large and loyal band of followers and admirers. Other drivers play very tactical games calculating the points or seconds required to gain a place or selecting events which they will focus on to leverage their championship position. With Colin it is all about pushing himself and the car as far as it will go. Period. He is only interested in being the best and winning rallies."




The first *McRae* was one of the earliest games to get the dynamics of driving on snow to feel realistic. It remains a convincing way of highlighting the deceptively intricate nature of the handling model

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Kuju

DATE FOUNDED: 1998

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 160

HEADS OF STUDIO: Jonathan Newth (MD), below left, and Ian Baverstock (business development director and chairman of TIGA)





URL: www.kuju.com

KEY STAFF

Mark Washbrook (head of London studio), Ed Daly (head of Brighton studio), Julian Davis (head of Action), Tony Kavanagh (head of Sheffield studio), Kevin Holloway (managing director, Kuju Wireless Publishing).

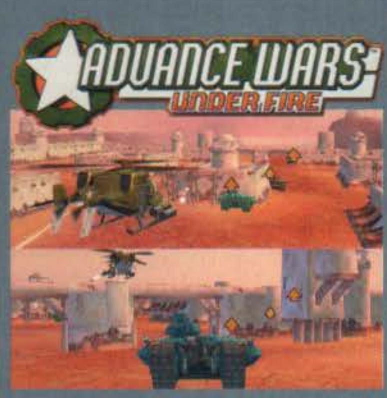
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

Call Of Duty: Finest Hour (online game; PS2, Xbox), *Fire Warrior* (PS2, PC), *Microsoft Train Simulator* (PC), *Crash Twinsanity* (Vodafone Live!), *Club Football & LMA Manager* (PC conversions), *Lotus Challenge* (PC, PS2, Xbox, GameCube, mobile), *Fireblade* (PS2, Xbox).

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE: Action, console strategy, PS2 online, lifestyle, conversions, wireless.



Kuju's work on *Call Of Duty* on PS2 and Xbox involved creating the game's multiplayer aspect



Advance Wars: Under Fire on GameCube is being produced as a firstparty Nintendo title at Kuju's London studio, which previously created *Fireblade*



UK LOCATIONS: Godalming (near Guildford), London, Brighton and Sheffield

CURRENT PROJECTS: *Advance Wars: Under Fire* (GC; Nintendo); *The Regiment* (PS2, PC; Konami); unannounced PC title for major league publisher; unannounced PS2, Xbox and PC title for relatively new publisher; *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (mobile).

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY

"One of Europe's first PS2 and Xbox developers, Kuju has continued to invest in its Heracles engine, which provides a mature and proven second-generation technology base on these platforms (as well as GameCube and PC). As well as support for the current generation there is a PSP version of the Heracles engine, and development of the next-generation version for Xenon and PS3 is well underway.

"Heracles is based around a flexible and extensible scene graph and supports advanced lightmap rendering through integration of Mental Ray on all platforms as well as: DirectX 9 Effect file support, an advanced hierarchical skinned animation system with multiple animation blending, aggressive VU0 and VU1 optimisation on PS2, full-screen effects (eg bloom) and FSAA.

"The Heracles foundation layer provides all the standard components expected of a fully-featured engine including data streaming, as well as Delta – an advanced delta reflection and serialisation framework.

"In addition to Heracles-native systems the engine actively supports middleware components with support for Havok and ODE physics integrated as well as AI Implant, which provides advanced AI algorithms and the LUA language providing a general-purpose scripting solution.

"The engine also has a selection of high-level components like the Tequila special effect and particle editor and system, the Spark Flash player for user interfaces and a sophisticated audio system supporting Dolby Pro Logic II.

"Kuju was one of the first European developers to ship a PS2 online title (*Warhammer 40K: Fire Warrior*) and has continued to invest in its k-Net technology which provides cross-platform support for peer-to-peer and client-served console network gaming (PS2 online and Xbox Live). The most recent product to include k-Net is Activision's *Call Of Duty* on PS2 and Xbox.

"Our next-generation technology is building on our existing foundation layer with advanced shaders (including normal and parallax maps) core to our rendering engine, a lighting system moving towards a true global illumination model (realtime PRT-based lighting) and a camera-control system extending beyond depth of field to exposure control, resulting in truly 'filmic' visual experiences."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Safeguarding success

The future for UK developers is set to depend as much on advice provided by a new breed of legal and financial experts as it will on hard code

www.sarassin.net
www.bwlaw.co.uk
www.brightsparkentertainment.com

At the start of the PlayStation2 era, conventional wisdom stated that UK developers would survive by bulking up, becoming so-called 'superdevelopers'. Broadly defined as multi-team studios, often based in multiple locations, superdevelopers would prosper, not only because they had the numbers to work on many projects, but also possessed the flexibility to shift labour where it was needed, getting jobs done faster. The intervening years have proved the concept works brilliantly – if you're a publisher. EA, Take Two, Activision, Ubisoft and THQ have all used cash raised from the stock markets to buy up talent, typically doubling their development headcount in the process. And with well-organised production techniques in place they've efficiently shunted work and staff around the globe in order to get games such as *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* and *The Sims 2* completed on time.

For the majority of UK developers, though, the superdeveloper ideal was ruinous. Lacking quality producers and easy access to cheap money to cover their monthly burn rate, they became focused on signing deal after deal just to keep their multiple teams busy. The result was a dependence on badly paid work-for-hire jobs which, if canned, caused company-wide bankruptcy.

So a new way of doing business has emerged. Instead of equating size with stability, the aim is to work smarter. Invoking various outsourcing methodologies – everything from middleware, such as RenderWare and Havok, to external audio, design and art production – one of the biggest shifts has occurred in relation to financial and business services. Whereas, in the past, a studio head might have asked his family

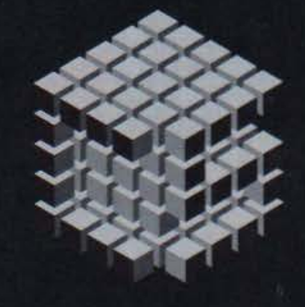


One example of the new breed of UK developers is Juice Games, whose externally funded racer *Juiced* was rescued from publisher insolvency thanks to retention of the intellectual property rights



Recent high-profile launches *Halo 2* and *GTA: San Andreas* were both created by their publishers' own studios. In order to succeed in such a marketplace, as well as compete against cheaper games from developing countries, UK developers will to take full advantage of the increasing financial and business expertise which is available from companies such as Sarass





solicitor to check over a contract, or tried to get a loan out of the local bank manager, specialists are now available .

One such is legal expert **Vincent Scheurer**. Previously a game specialist at law firm Osborne Clark, he's recently set up his own outfit, Sarassin. "Lawyers used to be considered as an insurance policy – something to help you sleep once the deal is done," he says. "Recently, however, there's been a growing awareness we can offer substantial value for money beyond just reviewing the final agreement. We're also well-placed to offer tactical, even strategic, advice in relation to the developer's business."

As **Robert McGough**, a lawyer with Beachcroft Wansbroughs, points out, one key area is intellectual property rights (IPRs). "If you look at games such as *Tomb Raider*, *Worms* or *Championship Manager*, the IPRs can develop a significant independent value," he says:



Videogaming's popularity continues to grow, but UK developers will have to start focusing on business as well as making better games if they want to survive



Chart-toppers are responsible for hundreds of thousands in royalty payments, although this is an area to which some publishers have failed to offer respect. In one particular investigation, Media Forensics found a shortfall of $400,000

"So although it's often difficult to retain rights because developers are perceived to be in a weaker position than the publisher, they should at least be looking to protect themselves within the contract in the event a publisher either pulls out of the game or becomes insolvent."

In such a context, a pertinent example is Warrington's Juice Games, which finished its racing game *Juiced* only to see publisher Acclaim go bust. Fortunately, though, because project management and finance company Fund4Games had funded the title, Juice retained the IPR and was able to sign the game with THQ. Indeed, as game development shifts from being a straightforward business relationship between a developer (which makes the game), and the publisher (which funds development and markets and sells the finished game), new opportunities will arise for the smartest developers.

One of the most surprising shifts in the developer/publisher relationship in this respect are royalty audits. Typically triggered when the publisher has sold enough games to have recovered the developer's advance, any further sales result in some proportion of the sale price being paid to the developer. Yet it has always proved hard for the developer to be certain of the accuracy of the sales information provided. This is where companies such as Media Forensics step in. Set up to check the accuracy of royalty statements, co-director **Faye Sieracki** says the past couple of years have seen a significant jump in interest from developers."The bottom line is that mistakes can happen," she says. "Sometimes you think: 'How can a publisher make a $400,000 mistake on a royalty statement?' but occasionally that's what we find."

With such a range of sophisticated services available, there should be little doubt developers will become commercially smarter, even aggressive. And according to **Phil Wright**, CEO of business development consultancy Brightspark, previously with Gremlin and Rage, they'll need to be. "With the growth of eastern European and Asian developers, publishers have a lot more content to choose," he reckons. "UK developers will have to work twice as hard to get deals." The trick, he says, will be focusing on what you do best: "Some developers have always known how to do business, while some haven't and never will. The trick for them will be to recognise that, while they're great technically, when it comes to commercial work they need to call in some help."

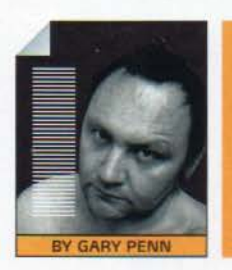
It's money that matters

Despite claiming to have discovered over £12 million in unpaid royalties for UK developers, cash isn't the main objective in a royalty audit, says Sieracki: "Often a developer is about to start negotiations over a sequel or a new deal," she says. At this level, an audit can guarantee the relationship between the two parties is above board. "In the best cases, publishers are keen to complete the audit, sort out any problems and use the experience as an opportunity to talk to their client about follow-on business," she explains.

Another reason for the growing interest in regular audits is the amount of venture capital investment in the games industry. This often results in external advisors being placed on a developer's management board, who will require an audit as a way of ensuring their investment is being properly managed.

"An element of standard corporate governance means the company's board needs to demonstrate it has done everything to ensure the figures are correct," says Sieracki. This is important as a developer's worth is calculated from the value of the intellectual property it owns as well as the revenue streams it generates from royalties. "Without someone going in and checking a publisher's numbers, it's very difficult to say they look about right," she points out.

The news for developers is often good. Because of the way contracts are structured, any mistakes on the part of publishers usually reduce the money paid out. "Almost all of the calculations negatively impact the developer's royalty," reveals Sieracki. "That's why errors tend to go in favour of the developer, although we have discovered a couple which went the other way."



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

It is what you do and the way that you do it

Reading books such as Francis DK Ching's Architecture, Form, Space And Order is both inspirational and dispiriting. There's so much in that book that applies to playscape design, but seeing such established crafts laid bare with such authoritative conviction is both enthralling and disheartening because it shows how far the videogame industry has to go before it has anything approaching the same understanding.

There are plenty of theories about what makes good games, which sometimes make for interesting reading, but so few practical approaches to design – less about making good games, more good practice for making games.

I'm not saying there could or even should be any one simple solution, just that there are so few solutions available. There aren't many clearly defined methods of building virtual toys, games and product, while every other established industry has proven methodologies to provide solid foundations.

I used to enjoy the more artistic, freeform development approach widely adopted since the foundation of the 'videogames industry'. But it almost always ended in tears. These days (partly due to necessity) I prefer a more lateral approach, creating clear-cut layers and only building upwards once the foundation is stable.

This means starting with the bare minimum toyset in its simplest form, then adding activities to create play, then adding supernatural rules and structure to create the game and only then adding the rest of the product (because there's almost always more to this than a game). Substance then surface and then subtlety. The aim is never to get bogged down in detail too soon. There's no point in embellishing something that doesn't work.

Visual and audible references and sketches help clarify styles before making commitments. More detailed visualisations also provide an obvious benchmark: something to aim for.

Establishing the critical toyset and natural rules as soon as possible in any form usually gives a strong idea of how well the core concept works. (The natural rules being those that underpin the 'microcosm'.) Words in documents are useful for establishing motive, means and opportunity, but the sooner the concept is tangible the better – through acting or cards or other tokens or with a board, but preferably in the target medium (essential if the concept's dependent on more physical qualities).

As a matter of convenience and to minimise distraction, the most basic placeholders possible are always used, not only to represent audiovisual qualities but also for software, portions of play and so on – and always 'to scale' (with an appreciation of a possible final form). It's very satisfying to fill in the placeholders during production, almost like a game in itself.

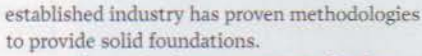
Any concept can be simply represented through simple placeholders with the rules simplified to make rapid realisation a reality. Exactly the same methods are employed in other design fields: functional test models. The form is less relevant. Form is typically detail.

This all results in a lengthy preproduction period (preparing the repertoire, exploring its potential and establishing limitations) followed by a short production phase (building the repertoire and creating a true first pass of the whole) and then a lengthy postproduction phase (to edit, move, adjust timings, tidy up, add detail and add special effects and ceremonies, extrapolate where necessary).

Thinking in terms of toys and the components used to make them also helps focus on play and dramatic simplicity. Seeing everything from story to activities to toy actions as components has many benefits including visibility of some of the more abstract aspects of development (the notion of a referee, for example, to oversee play). The notion of components also leads to a clear idea of the scope of the work, identifying dependencies and not underestimating the amount of work involved in making components, eg: a vehicle's engine or horn is considered a component, not a simple audio effect. The focus is on a distinctive part – not a piece of audio or video or software but a composite component.

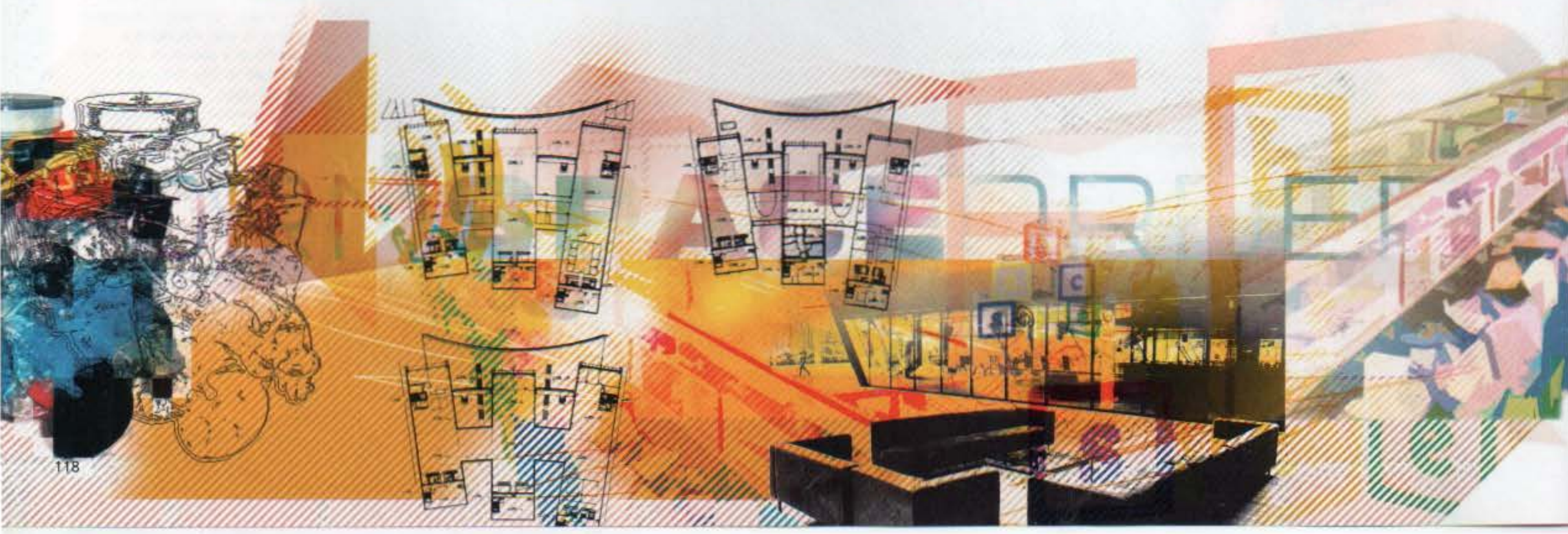
This approach has worked well enough in practice for many years now. It's just one of the ways to make shit happen; it doesn't guarantee incredible concepts but it does make the development of concepts more predictable, manageable and visible.

Standards help – having a suite of known techniques (part and parcel of 'repertoire') and using distinctive categories to become familiar with and build on repeatable components. It means having to think less about what needs to be done – it provides predictable patterns to follow to make it easier to focus on using repertoire. It also means adopting more of a 'production line' mentality but, at the end of the day (and an agreed development lifecycle and budget) at least there's a finished product of competent quality, no one's dead, mortgages are paid and mouths are fed.



"Words in documents are useful for establishing motive, means and opportunity, but the sooner the concept is tangible the better"

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY

The eyes have it

A darkened room. I am leaning forward in concentration, grasping a controller and getting ready to press a button while I watch a pattern of glowing and flashing multi-coloured lights that moves around to the accompaniment of various pseudo-mechanical sound effects. Where's this going? How many was that? Did I miss one? Quick, press three times. A computerised female voice, of the sort that announces facility alarms or self-destruct countdowns, confirms: "One, two, three." And they're off again. OK, let's make sure we get it right this time. I'm enjoying this.

But it's not a videogame. Your slightly myopic correspondent is at the optician. Since I was last there, they have acquired this shiny new machine which tests peripheral vision. So I lean my forehead on the edge of a large box and sport a fetching piratical patch over one eye. I follow a red dot around the inside of the box.

> "What I found interesting was how much more involving taking this test was than playing many big-budget commercial games"

When it stops, one or more green lights will flash briefly somewhere on the screen. I need to thumb a button to tell how many I saw. Sometimes they light up faintly, sometimes I don't see any at all, and wonder if it's a trick. It's really quite involving.

Finally, the results come through: my peripheral vision is fine. I feel strangely exhilarated, but the experience had a wider resonance. It's not just the obvious fact that this computerised diagnostic system owes so much to the pervasiveness of videogame technology. What I found interesting was how much more involving taking this test was than playing many big-budget commercial games that cross my desk.

A large part of it, I realised, was the feeling that there was really something at stake here. I had no reason to think my peripheral vision was faulty – it's not as if I've been careening sideways into lampposts of late – but the remote idea that some creeping, as-yet-undiagnosed retinal disorder could be unearthed in the process really committed me to doing the best I could. In a videogame, by contrast, you can usually do something aimless or stupid, half-concentrating, safe in the knowledge that failure can be instantly effaced and there is always another try.

How, indeed, might a videogame instil a comparable sense of involvement? The interestingly drastic option is symbolised by *Steel Battalion*, where you lose your entire saved game if you fail to eject from your burning mech in time. That certainly ups the psychological ante, but at a rather high cost to anyone who



actually suffers this erasure, perhaps through no fault of their own, for instance if a friendly cat comes and sits down in the wrong place on the controller at just the wrong time.

More usually a game will try to solicit our engagement with some suitably epic storyline to the effect that we are the only person who can save the planet; a species of narrative that is ruled with an iron fist by the law of diminishing returns. Yeah, I was the only one who could save the planet in *Generic Thirdperson Shooter 34: The Half-Real Apocalypse Prophecy*, too, and frankly I couldn't be arsed to finish the job because the game sucked.

Alternatively, you could argue that the player becomes emotionally involved in a game where (s)he can empathise with the other characters in the world. Occasionally I can buy this. The inhabitants of Hyrule Village in *Ocarina Of Time* or Yorda in *Ico* did exert a pull, but that wouldn't have been enough by itself without *OOT*'s astonishing symbolic richness and heartbreaking music, or *Ico*'s spellbinding architecture.

In the end, I think it's really all about me. And you, of course. What can you do in the gameworld? Are you learning, becoming more skilled, exulting in your capabilities? You become more involved in a game the more it serves as a kind of psychological prosthetic: an extension of power and challenge into a compelling other world.

So perhaps instead of trying to invent more lovable NPCs, videogames should try to do more interesting things with us, as players, as humans. The peripheral-vision test obviously can't be replicated on a TV screen six feet away, but its highly specific mechanic points to unused potential. Many games already use surround sound to give the player clues or scares. Try it with seeing: why should what you see always be what you get? Visual conundrums could interact fruitfully with dynamic ones. Many paintings, such as Holbein's The Ambassadors, demand careful decoding; and more abstract work, such as that of Bridget Riley, explores the physical limits of our visual capabilities.

In games, on the other hand, there is a lot of flash and artistry in the visual element, but it is mostly junk food for the retinas: designed to be as quickly assimilated as possible, not to be lingered and puzzled over. It is reassuring rather than challenging. Games could surely make us work more with our eyes, as well as with our fingers.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com

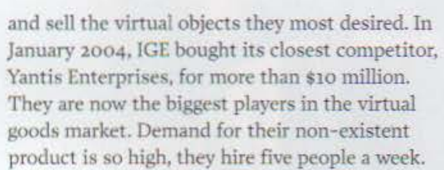




THE GUEST COLUMN

The virtual economy

At age 12, **Brock Pierce** was a child actor. He debuted large, with a starring role as Gordon, the ten-year-old lead of 1992's The Mighty Ducks, but by '95 the roles (notably a bit part in the straight-to-TV flop Problem Child 3: Junior In Love) were less prestigious. By his late teens, the acting work dried up. As a hobby, he collected trading cards, but he'd always had trouble finding the last one or two he needed. So, to augment his failing income, he set up a business bulk-buying trading cards and selling them individually to people keen to complete their collection. After the bottom fell out of the trading card market, he cast around for another idea. He'd always been a keen online gamer, and in 2001, after a chance meeting with Alan Debonneville (a Hong-Kong-based ex-*WarCraft 2* champion), Pierce and Debonneville co-founded Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE) to help online gamers buy and sell the virtual objects they most desired. In January 2004, IGE bought its closest competitor, Yantis Enterprises, for more than $10 million. They are now the biggest players in the virtual goods market. Demand for their non-existent product is so high, they hire five people a week.



EverQuest had a per-capita GNP of $2,266 – that's richer than India, Bulgaria, or China, and almost on a par with Russia

People who dwell within virtual worlds, entranced by the possibilities of reinvention in an entirely risk-free second-life, will happily pay real money for virtual objects or property to expand their online lives. People who want, say, their own virtual Frank Lloyd Wright-style cantilevered home by the virtual seaside, but don't have time to construct it themselves, will pay substantial sums of real-world money instead. In 2002, one academic, Edward Castronova, studied the economy of the planet's third-largest virtual world, *EverQuest*. He found that *EverQuest* had a real, consistent US dollar-exchange rate, which put the average wage of each player – the virtual money they earned while playing the game, hunting for virtual booty and creating new virtual items – at the equivalent of $3.42 per hour. One *EQ* platinum piece, he found, was worth more than ¥1. From that, Castronova calculated the virtual world's GNP: $135 million. *EverQuest*, he concluded, had a per-capita GNP of $2,266 – that's richer than India, Bulgaria, or China, and almost on a par with Russia. The world's 77th largest economy is therefore a sub-continent that only nearly exists, and last year, virtual game items accounted for eBay auctions worth more than $20 million. (Castronova estimates the actual total, including objects traded for other virtual currencies, at around $400 million.)

The success of every massive virtual world rests on its balanced economy. Once virtual worlds are built, much of the development team's time is taken up with managing the flow of money. (You'd think the designers of virtual worlds would feel like gods, but as the NCSoft *Lineage II* team, who meet each Monday morning to monitor in-world inflation rates, told me, they often feel more like taxmen.) Naturally, the game companies don't want anyone messing with their revenues (estimated at £1.9 billion globally, predicted to rise to £9.8 billion by 2009). Most game companies want to stop the grey-market trade in virtual items, but they have little legal support: no country has yet recognised virtual items as property. So, when eBay – on the encouragement of Sony – banned trade in virtual items, crowds of independent traders leapt into the vacuum.

On a single day in September, for £100 Sterling, IGE would have sold you virtual currency from one of 14 non-existent places. For *Lineage II*, your money would have bought you 10 million Adena, which would buy enoug swords and armour for any budding elf. Or, in *Second Life*, you could have bought 20,000 Linden Dollars to fritter away in a spree at the virtual malls, or carefully invest in 13,000 virtual square metres of riverside land. The homebodies among you might have plumped for 2.5 million Simoleans to spend in the onlin version of *The Sims*. For that, you could fill you virtual house twice over with antique virtual furniture. (At IGE.com, while trading currency, you can also click on the charity banner – 'Virtual Worlds, Virtuous Hearts' – to donate some of your virtual cash to the Mercy Corps, which works to alleviate realworld poverty.)

From his office in Dearborn, Michigan, Pierce told me his company buys items and currency from suppliers across the real world. Some are American kids who play games at evenings and weekends. Others own cybercafes in Europe and the Middle East; they let people play for free, as long as each one donates half their virtual booty to the cafe. IGE also works with Hong Kong partners who subcontract the work to Chinese suppliers. There, people are employed to play games nine to five, hunting virtual beasts, fashioning virtual items from their loot and selling them on via IGE.

When I mentioned the idea of 'virtual sweatshops' Pierce was quick to interrupt. "They can earn up to $100 a day," he said. "That's a higher wage than almost any career available in rural China."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Gran



TOP SECRET

THE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON DC

FROM:
William F. Bodkin, Assistant Director, Special Operations

SUBJECT:
Transcript of interview with Eileen Peethe (Mrs), 9th November 1982

EILEEN PEETHE: I was hanging out the washing as I usually do when my husband <UNINTELLIGIBLE> his underoos (he has an allergy to nuts), and I heard this kind of weird sound coming from behind the outhouse. A kind of rattling - like how our mutt breathed when he got a quarter stuck in his throat. We had a few problems last fall with chipmunks, so I thought it could have been them come back around. As my husband was down the store buying grits I went in and grabbed me a baseball bat from the barn. But when I got round back I saw... I saw...

INTERVIEWER: Take your time.

EP: It was this kind of... oh, sweet Jesus. It was breathing. Its mouth ... of lolling open and closed, and I could hear it breathing. I won't never forget that ... threw me a few stones at it, but they just kind of rebounded off its hide, with a rubbery, twanging noise.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe what it looked like?

EP: It had no limbs that I could see - and once I was sure it wasn't going to bite me, I kicked it over with my foot just to be sure.

INTERVIEWER: You mean the limbs had been <UNINTELLIGIBLE>?

EP: I'm saying it never had them. It was perfectly round, like a soccer ball. Yet it was alive. Anyhow, I kicked it too hard, and it got wedged between the outhouse and a rock. I had to <UNINTELLIGIBLE> it out using a hoe, I think I hurt it. It started sobbing like a child. Oh, sweet mercy...

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to pause?

EP: No, no. Sorry. We'll go on. So, yes. Its skin was this sickly yellow, and smooth, and it had these big, wet, black eyes, these totally black eyes, which just kind of stared out at me. I'm telling you, it was haunting, but as God is my witness I swear to you it meant me no harm. It was just laying there in the pumpkin patch, its eyes pleading for help, and a tiny pink tongue trying to form words.

INTERVIEWER: Words? You believe this creature was intelligent?

EP: You bet your ass. And when I spoke to it, it rolled over to face me, and tried to form a smile. <PAUSE> So, anyhow, I wrapped it in an old rag, and took it into the house to show to my old man when he got home.

INTERVIEWER: How did your husband react?

EP: He flew into a rage. Started yelling and all about how I'd brought the Devil into our home. At first he tried smashing it to death with a beer bottle, but when that didn't work he shoved the entire medicine box down its throat. We thought it might be poisoned, but the pills just seemed to send it into some kind of super-strong, psychotic state. It rolled right off the table, and started trying to take bites out of everything it bumped into, making this gurgling 'waka-waka-waka' kind of sound at the back of its throat.

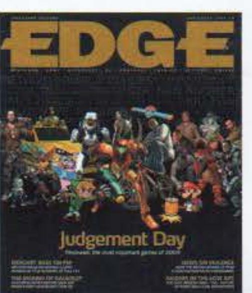
INTERVIEWER: How did you stop it?

EP: My husband beat it repeatedly with a meat tenderizer. Split the sucker apart. We were covered from head to ankle in its blood. It looked up at me one last time as it lay on the floor, dying. Not before he had taken one last bite right out of my gumboots, though. That boy sure was hungry.

INTERVIEWER: You think it was a male?

EP: Hell, son. Didn't I mention? It may not have had arms and legs ...

inbox



Issue144

You say it's impossible to construct a valid argument for illegally downloading software (**E143**) with regard to the recent *Halo 2* leak. That may well be true for Xbox games, but how about this: the morning after the *Half-Life 2* release, a colleague of mine came into work spitting blood because the copy he bought via Steam kept on crashing with memory read errors after only a few minutes of play.

There was no support on the Steam website for this issue, despite a forum that was filled with hundreds of complaints from users with the same problem. The URL provided in the end user licence for returning purchased software was also defunct.

By the afternoon, he had located the cracked version online and, ignoring the ridiculous rumours (and even some cryptic comments from Valve themselves) that this was a honeypot for illegal downloaders, he found that this version worked perfectly fine.

The illegal version simply has the authorisation checks removed and runs independently of Steam – therefore there's no online authentication and no 30 minutes unlocking 4Gb of files on your hard drive.

Reading the agreement that comes with the authentic retail copy I bought, I notice that there is absolutely no warranty supplied with this software. If you buy it and it doesn't work, you're screwed – you get no money back (the retailer advised me of this when I bought it) and you're left with a rather expensive coaster or at least 4Gb worth of useless files on your hard drive.

This tends to suggest that it is the security protection itself that is causing the current problems and driving people to download 'alternate' versions that actually work. A certain irony there, don't you think?

Richard Cross

Steam's ambition seems to be the root of its problems (creating *Half-Life 2* was a big enough task in itself, but to build a networking tool like that at the same time?), making it difficult to criticise, but it has made life painful for hundreds, if not thousands, of PC owners, and for that you don't need telling that Valve has been kicking itself. Thousands more have had no such problems with Steam, of course, but there's no avoiding the fact that the profile of the best game we've seen in some time has been sullied by various issues (see also p20 this month). Can we condone the use of cracked software, though? No.

How can you refer to the fresh smell of a shrink-wrapped manual when most publishers today are too cheap to bother including manuals with games?

Your rant against software piracy and peer-to-peer in **E143** made me laugh. How can you refer to the fresh smell of a shrink-wrapped manual when most publishers today are too cheap to even bother including printed manuals with their games, putting them on the CD as .pdf files instead? Did the irony of Atari's *Neverwinter Nights Gold Edition* branding escape you when, upon opening the box, all one could find were the game CDs (and a CD key which was completely illegible)? If the games industry is always getting bigger and more profitable, how come the last BioWare game I bought had a T-shirt, full-colour map, manual and collectible cards in the box? Surely this taste for luxury must be what caused Interplay to go belly-up, and Atari's frugal treatment of their releases is an attempt to stave off the same fate.

Also, while not condoning software piracy, it is impossible for me to wish for the demise of the peer-to-peer community when the last two Ubisoft games I bought (*Prince Of Persia* and *Far Cry*) refused to work on my PC because I had disk-emulation software installed on it (which I use for quite legitimate reasons). I understand that piracy is costing the games industry quite a lot of money, but that does not give them the right to dictate what their customers can use their PCs for apart from playing their games! What if the next step would be for Ubisoft to declare that their software will not work if there are any EA games installed on the same hard drive?

I'm sure that in **Edge**'s offices there are several PCs which are used for nothing else than for reviewing PC games; however, those of us in the real world have other uses for them too, and until Ubisoft realises this I'll think twice before buying any more of their games.

M Papadopoulos



So, the new slim PS2 finally broke me and I'm once again a Sony owner. All the recent *Ico 2* coverage in Edge made me decide to try the original.

Was it available at Game? Nope. The situation was the same at the online retailers, while on Amazon Marketplace and fleaBay the going rate seems to be £60!

Was *Ico*, brilliant as it might have been, a flop? And, if the Sony generation really does get the games it deserves, what the hell have I let myself in for?

Yours, dismayed at being denied a little silver disc,

David Harold

Contrary to popular belief, Sony did actually spend money on *Ico*'s marketing, but no, it just didn't really sell. So it looks like you'll soon be kissing that £60 goodbye.

Was it a mistake to claim that games have crossed over to become art? Yes, says Krunk



We gather *Half-Life 2*'s packaging seemed like a rush job because that's what it was – the proposed release date had come and gone and the priority was to get it out there into the shops. As we've already discussed, though, the whole situation surrounding the game has been messy. We're completely in support of publishers that make a special effort with packaging (special memories of Infocom's games are hard to shift), although with the standardisation of DVD-style boxes it's becoming more difficult for items to stand out. As for your experiences with Ubisoft titles, again the problem is a localised one, although we agree that such restrictions are out of order. We'll have some answers for you next month.

Does anyone else experience these spooky moments of mental clarity, digital dexterity and Zen-like 'in the zone' gaming prowess after a serious skinful?

Recently, **Edge** boldly proclaimed that videogames are art, but the examples cited [in **E**143] were not videogames! In actuality, videogame devices in various forms were used to create pieces of art which resemble videogames to varying degrees. A suitable analogy would be a painter's canvas and his paint. Just as a painter creates something from these tools, so have the artists in **Edge**'s article formed works from preexisting games.

Two good examples of videogames as art would be *The Longest Journey*, for characterisation and storyline (admittedly basic, but relative to the average videogame it is noticeably more mature), and *Myst III: Exile*, for sheer aesthetic beauty. These are not games trying to be art; these are games trying to deliver as full an experience as possible, and in doing so edge towards what the general public may be inclined to view as art.

Halo 2 is an example of a game which is desperately trying to be considered as art, and it falls flat on its face, much the same as *Metal Gear Solid 2* did before it. A ludicrous plot with hideously cliched characters; long, boring cut-scenes with painful voice acting and not playing as the main character for the sake of storyline. None of these things are fun, nor do they enhance *Halo 2* as a game, and as a piece of art they clearly detract from what Bungie sought to achieve.

Ultimately, art is supposed to make us think, and games are supposed to be fun. When the two collide, we can see beauty; we can relate to characters who exist only as software; we can enjoy a story which we are truly a part of. Or, as in the case of *Halo 2*, we can writhe in impatience and apathy while some collection of polygons with a cheesy voiceover generates a convoluted explanation for why we can no longer enjoy being the Master Chief, then rush through the next section with complete disregard for the outcome of the actions of the creature we are forced to control.

Of course, you can always skip the cut-scenes...
Krunk

And yet someone, somewhere, would deem *Halo 2* to be art. No? Whatever the case, this month's article on *Dreamfall* (p44), *The Longest Journey*'s sequel, should prove to be of interest.

I'm sure I'm not the only person to be irked by some of Dominik Diamond and Johnny Ffinch's comments in **E**143, but I am particularly keen to separate their opinion from actual fact.

As part of the small team who worked on Gamepad 4, I can quite passionately say that the show is anything but lazy – considerable toil and craft went into every broadcasted minute of the series, and I have the mouse-hand and myopia to prove it.

To proclaim that Gamepad was a 'media ripoff' is misguided – whilst it was part of our remit to feature games footage (an admittedly curious choice for a videogames show), we did more than simply 'slam an EPK in'. I'm not certain whether Mr Diamond has ever watched the raw B-roll footage that game companies (grudgingly) distribute, but it takes skill, patience and intimate knowledge of a game to play, record and edit a narrative-driven 30-second or three-minute feature. Of course, you could always bookend each package with puppets, glamour models and knob gags.

I know it's all part of Diamond's schtick to stick two waggling fingers up at his contemporaries, and, as someone who grew up on GamesMaster, it's also strangely warming to be on the receiving end. But I'd hate for Gamepad viewers and **Edge** readers (do the two overlap, I wonder?) to take his profane bluster seriously and feel that they had somehow been short-changed by a cynical televisual cabal – rest assured that all the Gamepad team were dedicated to both playing games and making the best show they could.

I wish Ffinch, Diamond and the When Games Attack crew all the best with their programme, and look forward to sharing a guilty chuckle with them. It is, however, disappointing that these seasoned pros, with the enviable resources of Gamer TV and Transworld International available to them, have opted to revert to the laddish staples of the previous decade rather than attempt something new and unusual.

Perhaps we'll have to wait a little longer for a truly adult gaming show.
Tim Parmee



I'm not sure how PC games mags deal with online play sections of reviews but it's something I found shockingly absent in your *Halo 2* review. I'm not new to gaming (I've been absolutely hooked on games ever since *Alex Kidd* on MS2) but never have I been addicted to a game quite like *Age Of Mythology*. *AOM* has a great singleplayer campaign but it's nothing in comparison to how the game plays once opened to the world of online gaming. It has an enormous base of totally addicted fans as well as an extremely competitive rating sytem.

I haven't even played *Halo 2* and don't own an Xbox either but I'd be very surprised if the situation here is any different. I could be wrong here but I can easily imagine that those with Xbox Live may not even bother playing through the singleplayer scenario, and from my experience of online gaming I wouldn't blame them. Personally I think the online aspect of a game as important as *Halo 2* deserves at least a whole page, not a tiny box in the corner to remind players it has an online mode.
Joe Burrows

Often, playing pre-release software over a network does not successfully emulate the conditions a normal user would experience. Beyond that, you also get into the realms of the online aspect changing over time, as developers add in new features. For these reasons, and more, it's not always possible from day one to test online components as exhaustively as we'd like, but it's an area we're looking into addressing in the future.

The mention of *Super Monkey Ball*'s Expert level seven in your conversation with Archer Maclean (I suspect regarding the insane difficulty level so early on in the roster) in your *Mercury* feature (**E**144) jogged some amusing memories and spurred me to ask if anyone else shares a particular phenomenon I sometimes experience while gaming. All will become clear, literally.

Allow me to take you to the London Docklands about 18 months ago. I was sitting in my living room with my Geordie flatmate, getting to grips with a new copy of the glorious *Monkey Ball*. After and hour or two of festivities we decided to embark on a twoplayer Expert mode and it wasn't long before we got to the infamous level seven. Sure enough, we were both struggling

Continued

to progress. Minutes went by like seconds. Palms were frictionless... and then, a breakthrough! After 45 minutes, I rolled through the finish line. Unbridled joy. Geord, with unblinking concentration, utters something akin to "Yoo jammy, fookin' bastad" and continues his level seven assault. Ten more minutes pass in which I finish another three or four levels. At this, Geord calmly puts down his pad and silently retires upstairs. Muffled bangs and truly disturbing profanities can be heard. Sweet smugness settles snugly. Geord returns from his "little time-oot, like" to discover that I had reached level 21, just in time to start getting ready to meet some mates for a pint. We left the GameCube on, Geord vowing to finish level seven on our return. By this point he'd been stuck there for over 90 minutes.

Now for the phenomenon. On our return, it would be fair to say that we were really quite pissed. Geord stumbles to the kitchen to assemble a snackathon. After a few failed attempts, I manage to pick up my pad and continue my game, really expecting disastrous results due to the fine thumb work required to navigate the Expert mazes. I then proceeded to finish the remaining 29 levels in a shade under 35 minutes, just in time for Geord to return from the kitchen and stare slack-jawed at the screen. (I seem to remember that he also burned his fingers, forgetting he was holding a couple of molten toasties.)

Does anyone else experience these spooky moments of mental clarity, digital dexterity and Zen-like, Drunken Kung-Fu style, 'in the zone' gaming prowess after a serious skinful? I've since discovered that headshots on *Halo* multiplayer are also easier under the influence.

Stuart Lutes

Research in the office reveals that **Edge**'s deputy art editor claims enhanced *Samba De Amigo* skills after about eight pints of strong import lage[r] but that's about it. Perhaps we're simply drinking the wrong stuff.



Your new look feels like a mix of cyber design from the mid-'90s and a gay parade on Prozac.
Henrik Palmér

Well, erm, thanks. And that's probably enough letters about Edge's redesign for now.

The idea of having a cartoon is fine, but if you're going to have a strip, then it should be like Penny Arcade. Plots would be good, that sort of thing.

Ann Kelly

Penny Arcade has a *plot*? Honestly, you guys crack us up. Anyway, be sure to check the recently created Crashlander archive, details of which are below.

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

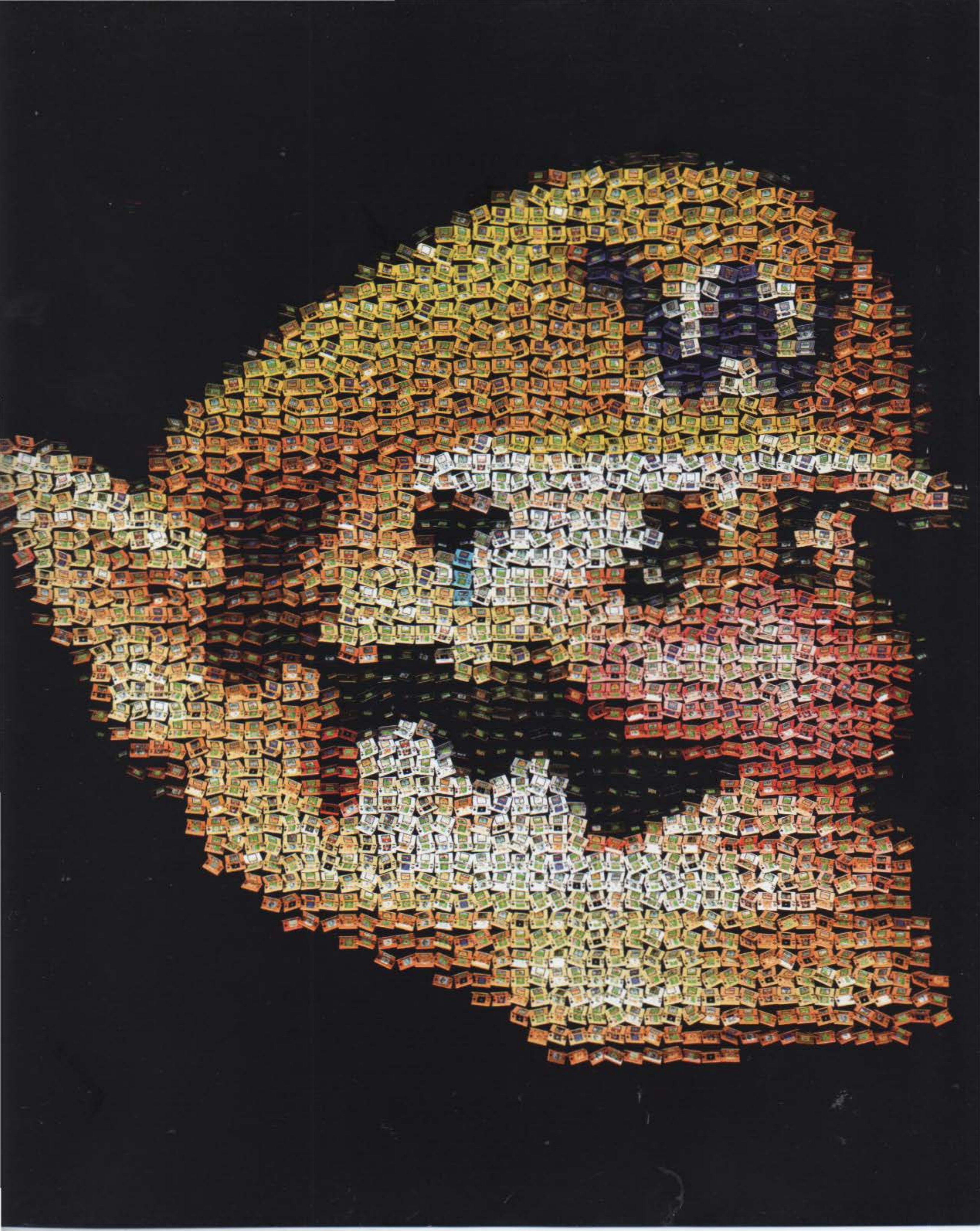
Crashlander
BY JAMES HUTCHINSON

ONLY A FEW SHORT MOMENTS BEFORE I CAN PLAY HALF-LIFE 2. I CAN'T WAIT!
14 HOURS LATER...
HMM.
I GUESS IT'S TIME TO GET MY HANDS DIRTY.
HELLO MR. GUBBINS. WHAT'S GOING ON DOWN THERE?!
OOHHH. IT'S A-AWFUL M-M-MASTER SPORK! I'VE L-L-LOST C-C-COMPLETE CONTROL! ALL THAT A.I. HAS GIVEN THEM IDEAS! TH-THEY HAVE DEMANDS!!
NAME IT.
THEY WANT HALF A G-GIG OF SDRAM P-PUT IN AND WEDNESDAY N-NIGHTS OFF!
HOW ABOUT YOU? YOU NEED A DRINK OF WATER OR SOMETHING?
P-PLEASE.
OKAY. TELL THE BOYS THEY'LL GET WHAT THEY WANT.
G-G-G-GOD B-B-B-BLESS YOU. M-M-M-MASTER S-S-S-SPORK!
PC GAMING: DON'T BOTHER IF YOU AIN'T GOT THE TOUCH.
WAKE UP MR. FREEMAN. WAKE UP AND SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL- SMELL-

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Next month

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